

Recasting ‘systematic theology’: gender, desire, and *théologie totale*

In the Prelude I sketched out the way that the various pieces of the argument that will follow in this book cohere. The metaphor was chosen advisedly: these pieces are not to be seen as merely broken shards, but as *tesserae* to be variously reconstellated in a kaleidoscope, or – by the end of this project – as eucharistic fragments to be gathered into a shared basket. I have attempted, in other words, to give just a brief glimpse of the multifaceted vision that informs this treatise ‘On the Trinity’. I have also hinted at the sort of reconception of the task of theology that is involved here: this will be a theology *in via*, as I called it, founded not in secular rationality but in spiritual practices of attention that mysteriously challenge and *expand* the range of rationality, and simultaneously darken and break one’s hold on previous certainties. Before I turn back to the world of early Christianity and to the origins of trinitarianism, I need to explain in more detail what such an ascetic, contemplative, proposal for theology actually entails.

Yet an ‘excursus on method’ is definitely something to be avoided: such a ponderous undertaking has been memorably derided as mere ‘throat-clearing’.¹ Thus in this chapter and the

¹ See Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1988), 163.

next I shall not so much be clearing my throat as redirecting the mind. Without this theological redirection, the pieces on the Trinity that follow might seem strangely disconnected; without this initial analysis of my intent, a range of misleading, but currently standard, theological disjunctions might still be exercising the reader, with negative imaginative and spiritual consequences.

So in Chapter 1, first, I shall set out to explain further why systematic theology (to be defined) must go on, even in a post-modern age; and also why it cannot credibly go on without urgent attention to matters of desire ('sex', 'sexuality', and 'gender', in secular parlance). The combination of these particular two sides to my argument is admittedly unusual. It is customary, that is, for postmodern gender theorists and feminists (insofar as they have dealings with matters of religion at all) to be extremely sceptical about the project of systematic theology, for reasons I shall discuss. It is perhaps even more common (conversely) for systematic theologians to be dismissive, even derogatory, about theologians interested in feminism or gender. It is rare indeed – although not completely unknown – for systematic theologians of any stature to take the category of gender as even a significant locus for discussion; and when they do, they tend to import a gender theory from the secular realm without a sufficiently critical *theological* assessment of it. I shall be concerned to show why this false disjunction between systematic theology and gender studies needs not so much to be overcome, but rather to be approached from a different, and mind-changing, direction. A robustly theological, indeed precisely *trinitarian*, perspective on gender is required, and not one that merely smuggles secular gender presumptions into the divine realm at the outset. It is the very threeness of God, I shall argue, transformatively met in the Spirit, which gives the key to a view of gender that is appropriately founded in bodily practices of prayer. In this way, more of my proposed

method of *théologie totale*² will thereby be disclosed: I shall show more closely how the activity of contemplation relates to the systematic task, and what changes it makes to it. I shall chart, too, how the ascetic undertaking, most paradoxically, makes the issue of desire the more acute, and gender rendered labile to it from the perspective of a theology *in via*. In short, I shall aim to bind questions of theological method, contemplative practice, and desire into a new tether. For they do belong together; and one can see all the more pressingly that they do once one grasps the implications for them of a specifically trinitarian understanding of God.

In Chapter 2 I shall then be able to turn back to the social and political questions with which an earlier generation of feminisms and concomitant feminist theologies was concerned. Much of the feminist theology from this earlier period now looks dated or methodologically flawed; but the social and political issues it attempted to solve have by no means gone away. In fact, if anything, they have intensified. Yet more recent gender study, especially that of postmodern philosophical allegiance, has tended in contrast to eschew the 'liberal' agenda of universal rights for women. It has thereby attracted the opprobrium of feminist political scientists still committed to such a global perspective. Here I shall extend my argument (already sketched in the Prelude), that secular, modernist philosophy, political thought, and sociology, along with the liberal feminist thinking that has classically been their partner, must at least remain as what I have called 'contrapuntal' voices in the contemporary theological task. The denigration of such thought is a theological and ethical mistake of grave consequence; yet the

² My use of this term (already fleetingly introduced in the Prelude) is based, although only loosely, on an analogy to the French Annales School's *l'histoire totale*, and on its goal of uncovering every level of an historical culture. As will shortly be explained, the evocations of *totale* are decidedly *not* 'totalizing' in the political sense.

critique, extension, and transformation of it is no less a matter of spiritual and theological urgency. Once again we shall discover that an apparently unconnected but distinctly *theological* matter – the issue of iconoclasm and the contemplative remaking of the imagination – is key to a right understanding of how such political and social thinking should proceed. Matters which appeared to have little to do with each other – liberal or socialist feminism and the problem of idolatry – come, in the perspective of a contemplative theology *in via*, into vital relation.

This methodological pincer movement in Chapters 1 and 2 will complete my purpose of disclosing the chief characteristics of a *théologie totale*. By the end of this discussion we shall have before us, and I shall have explained with some care, a new vision of systematic theology. Such a vision is not, I shall again insist, a compromise between long-standing ideological disjunctions in the practice of theology, but represents a subtle shifting of the terms of the discussion. The game can be replayed, and creatively so.

But first one has to understand what systematic theology has meant in the past, what it could mean now, and why it has come under such particular fire in this contemporary, postmodern era.

WHAT IS SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

'Systematic theology' is itself a modern category, but one that has a certain family resemblance relation – albeit loose – to other, historic, ways of attempting to present a complete, and inviting, vision of Christian doctrine in its various parts. A brief mention of a variety of such attempts in the tradition – which have proved themselves by their sheer creative staying power – will help me present an argument both for systematic theology's indispensability, and also for its malleability.

The great Alexandrian theologian Origen, for instance, wrote in the third century a text he entitled *De principiis* (*On first principles*), and which has often been read in the modern period as his attempt to do ‘systematic theology’. But it would be a grave mistake, as well as an anachronistic one, to see his undertaking in that one text as summing up everything he had to say about central Christian doctrines, let alone – as has also been charged – as a mere capitulation to Platonic philosophy. Origen’s exegetical writings, and his treatises on particular subjects (such as *On prayer*, to be reflected upon in Chapter 3), fill out the picture of his doctrinal vision in infinitely richer ways, which complement and expand on the central ‘principles’ of Christian philosophical theology enunciated in the *De principiis*. So Origen is indeed, in a sense, one of the first systematic theologians in Christian tradition; but one needs to look at a wide variety of his different sorts of writing to divine his full vision. This is already a telling lesson, because it indicates that systematic theology cannot necessarily be undertaken simply in one genre of writing; and hence the false disjunction of the *De principiis* from different sorts of texts like the *De oratione* is a mistake of some gravity.

Much later, in the eighth-century East in a context of increasing Islamic ascendancy, John Damascene’s *De fide orthodoxa* (*On the orthodox faith*) was another quite different, and much more succinct and focused, attempt to be systematic, reflecting the *cumulative* sense of doctrinal tradition in Greek Christian thought at the time. John of Damascus wrote to codify and clarify what was by then normatively orthodox in the East, and had been painstakingly learnt and refined through many centuries of theological and conciliar dispute in the post-Constantinian era. The representation and analysis of historic orthodoxy, then, can be another way of being systematic; but it is only one form, and a relatively restricted one, amongst many possible variations.

The later Western medieval tradition of commenting on 'Sentences', a different and strongly philosophical genre epitomized in the work of Peter Lombard and his commentators, has been said, in some contrast to John Damascene's work, to be inherently without totalizing intent, a necessarily 'fragmentary' undertaking (albeit one undertaken with a strong impetus to convict and persuade). One could, nonetheless, count it as another type of intellectual endeavour bent on unfolding a systematic account of Christian truth, but one focused on punctiliar and particular challenges and questions about the faith. In contrast, Thomas Aquinas's great *Summa Theologiae* (along with his earlier apologetic *Summa contra Gentiles*), represents one of the most breathtaking attempts in Christian tradition to provide a *complete* inventory of Christian doctrine, ethics, and sacramental practice, and their relation to contemporary philosophical and interreligious discussion. Here a full vision of Christian truth is unfolded with due attention to Bible and tradition, yet sustained by extraordinary argumentative power and continuous consideration of alternative approaches (as is appropriate to a *Summa* founded in the practice of philosophical 'disputation').

The early modern genre of 'Dogmatics' was, one might say, the Protestant answer to the Catholic magisterial account of authoritative doctrine, and in part also a belated mimicry and riposte to classic Catholic scholasticism. Here the so-called *loci* (standard points of doctrinal discussion, roughly based on the main items in the historic creeds)³ received a distinctively Protestant form. It was

³ The list of such *loci* has not remained static or unchanged in Christian 'systematic' tradition, but characteristically contains at least the following: God/Trinity; Christology (doctrine of Christ, divine and human); pneumatology (doctrine of the Spirit); anthropology (doctrine of the human person); sin and atonement; sacraments; ecclesiology (doctrine of the church); eschatology (doctrine of the end times). These are often supplemented by other items for discussion, such as: creation and providence; love and other divine attributes (or 'names'); epistemological and ethical topics; prayer; Christianity's relation to Judaism, Islam and to non-'Abrahamic' religious traditions.

one that was more scholastically formalized than that originally envisaged by the sixteenth-century lawyer and exegete John Calvin, who might be said to have founded Protestant systematic theology in Reformed mode. He had laid out his own programmatic theological vision for Geneva in his so-called *Institutes*, a doctrinal discussion in four parts which he consciously moulded on Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* and the Reformed practice of scriptural commentary.

Much later, Friedrich Schleiermacher, reacting in the early nineteenth century to what he perceived as the dead hand of established Protestant scholasticism in this Calvinist mode, freed his own revisionary account of Christian doctrine into a descriptive account of 'the current religious consciousness', and renamed it *Glaubenslehre* ('teaching on the faith'). This was a ploy that allowed him the opportunity to reorder the loci in a strikingly creative way, starting with an analysis of human dependence on God, and only then unfolding a new distribution of the older doctrinal themes. Famously, or notoriously, he put human religious 'feeling' at the heart of his systematic undertaking.

Reacting fiercely to Schleiermacher's liberal Calvinism (but at the same time covertly assuming many of its inherent features), Karl Barth in the twentieth century championed an equally innovative form of exposition which he first playfully titled 'irregular dogmatics', and later 'Church Dogmatics'. His approach, refounded in the primary authority of the biblical Word, allowed him also a signal freedom to unfold his own creative thought – even as it changed and developed – across a lifetime of prophetic political resistance and increasing (albeit somewhat covert) engagement with post-Enlightenment philosophy. It established him as the premier Continental theologian of his era. His work, with its resounding '*Nein!*' uttered against secular power politics and against any

attempts to moor theology in an analysis of the human, is probably still the dominating influence in new, contemporary attempts at systematic theology. Not the least of its attractions is its *apparent* rejection of philosophical apologetics, at a time when post-Kantian secular philosophy had appeared to place a roadblock across all attempts at speculative metaphysics.⁴

Fascinating respondents to Barth, however, even as he unfurled his vision, were the Roman Catholic systematic theologians Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, both of whom chose rather different forms of writing and starting point, even as they acknowledged their indebtedness to Barth: Rahner the essayist, who nonetheless eventually undertook a one-volume synthesis of his vision, starting from the anguished existential questionings of secularized 'man'; and von Balthasar, the lover of 'form', who – by reversing the order of Kant's three philosophical *Critiques* – chose to revision the core of Christian theology first through an *aesthetic* evaluation.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY FOR TODAY

Even to rehearse this selective (and admittedly Western-oriented) account of some famous systematic endeavours in the Christian tradition, is to demonstrate that attempts at a complete vision of Christian doctrine have taken many forms – appropriate to the philosophical, cultural, and political ethos of their times, or sometimes in conscious reaction to the same. It has been as effectively advanced in very short documents, on occasion, as in magisterial compendia of volumes at other times. One cannot therefore speak of

⁴ Barth thus might be seen as the reverse side of Kant – through an appeal to biblical authority which reaches into the realm of what Kant called the *noumenal*, if only by theological fiat.

systematic theology as a fixed or unchanging entity in Christian tradition. Even its starting points, criteria of theological truth, and fundamental philosophical presuppositions have been constantly open to renegotiation and debate, perhaps especially at the richest periods of its advance. Today, despite – and perhaps partly because of – the manifold objections to its very continuance in postmodern critique, systematic theology is in a remarkable state of regeneration. In some cases it takes the form of a careful, newly formulated Protestant scholasticism, albeit one heavily under the shadow of Barth; in other cases (and here one must locate the current endeavour) it is undertaken with a felt freedom to *recast* the central categories of thought at its disposal and to sit light to the burden of the traditional *loci*, even as the classic appeals to Bible, tradition, and reason are re-embraced and recast. If necessary, that is, one must start from a new perspective if this is the best way to recapture the contemporary imagination for Christ, or to reinvoke reflection on the perennial mysteries of the gospel. Such is the inspiration of the notion of systematics that informs this work. Systematics, in other words, does not convey the hubristic idea of a totalizing discourse that excludes debate, opposition, or riposte; but on the other hand, it does not falter at the necessary challenge of presenting the gospel afresh in all its ramifications – systematically unfolding the connections of the parts of the vision that is set before us.

In short, it is an *integrated* presentation of Christian truth, however perceived, that ‘system’ connotes here: *wherever one chooses to start has implications for the whole, and the parts must fit together*. However briefly, or lengthily, it is explicated (and sometimes, as we have seen, the shorter versions have been at least as elegant, effective, and enduring as the longer ones), ‘systematic theology’ must attempt to provide a coherent, and alluring, vision of the Christian faith.

WHY IS SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY DISTRUSTED?

But why, then, is systematic theology deemed contentious in our own postmodern age, even as it – paradoxically – enjoys such a notable period of revival? Why is 'order' so often perceived as a front for abuse, and 'system' as an assumed repression?

Three, often interlocked, contemporary forms of resistance to systematic theology can readily be identified, and cumulatively they might seem to be powerful. To examine them, however, is to enter the complex intellectual worlds of postmodern philosophy, political theory, and psycholinguistics: jargon and arcane theory abound, but I shall try to give a succinct, but fair, account of the issues. After I have done so, I shall return to the issue of desire which animates this whole volume, and show how these problems importantly connect to it.

The first resistance to systematic theology resides in the philosophical critique of so-called 'onto-theology': it claims that systematic theology falsely, and idolatrously, turns God into an object of human knowledge. The second resistance arises from the moral or political critique of so-called 'hegemony': it sees systematic theology (amongst other discourses that provide any purportedly complete vision of an intellectual landscape), as inappropriately totalizing, and thereby necessarily suppressive of the voices and perspectives of marginalized people. The third resistance is a feminist critique, arising from a particular brand of French, post-Freudian psychoanalytic thought. It accuses systematic thinking (of any sort) of being 'phallogentric', that is, ordered according to the 'symbolic',⁵ 'male' mode of thinking which seeks to clarify, control, and master. It is thereby repressive of creative materials

⁵ Meaning, in Jacques Lacan's use of this term, something like 'clear', 'analytical', 'demonstrable'.

culturally associated with ‘femininity’ and the female body, which are characteristically pushed into the unconscious.

I shall need to look briefly at each of these stringent criticisms in turn, but with a particular eye to assessing how they might be answered with the aid of the insights of a contemplative *théologie totale*. For the very act of contemplation – repeated, lived, embodied, suffered – is an act that, by grace, and over time, inculcates mental patterns of ‘un-mastery’,⁶ welcomes the dark realm of the unconscious, opens up a radical attention to the ‘other’, and instigates an acute awareness of the messy entanglement of sexual desires and desire for God. The vertiginous free-fall of contemplation, then, is not only the means by which a disciplined form of unknowing makes way for a new and deeper knowledge-beyond-knowledge; it is also – as I have already argued – the necessary accompanying practice of a theology committed to ascetic transformation. When one looks at the three resistances to systematic theology I have just outlined, one can already note how revealingly themes of knowledge, power, and gender are entangled and woven into these three objections. One begins to glimpse why it is that issues of sexuality, desire, and gender cannot by mere fiat, or simple denial, be dissociated from the claim to be able to continue the task of systematic theology. But from what has already been argued in the introductory Prelude, and now here, it may perhaps also be guessed that these three objections to systematic theology may be fully answerable, once the properly contemplative matrix of theology is acknowledged. Nonetheless, what there is to learn from these

⁶ I coin this term deliberately, to distinguish it from Milbank’s and others’ ‘non-mastery’ (see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990; 2nd edn 2006), 6). The desire *not* to ‘master’ cannot be summoned by mere good intention or fiat. It is a matter, I submit, of waiting on divine aid and transformation, a transcendent undoing of manipulative human control or aggression.

critiques is still highly significant and instructive. One cannot simply look away.

ANSWERING THE CHARGES AGAINST SYSTEMATIC
THEOLOGY: A RESPONSE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE
OF THÉOLOGIE TOTALE

That systematic theology should be perceived as necessarily engaged in a false reification of God, first, is the accusation made when systematics is seen as a form of 'onto-theology'. But what exactly does this accusation mean? The charge goes back to the claim that Greek philosophical metaphysics was already engaged in a hubristic and inappropriate attempt to explain the divine, the ultimate Cause, and so to extend metaphysics beyond its proper reach; and, further, that classical and scholastic Christian theology, in its dependence on Greek metaphysics, unthinkingly extended such a trait into its projects of philosophical and systematic theology. Even Thomas Aquinas has been (falsely) accused of such an 'onto-theological' error.

But the mistake in the charge itself is that it has failed to understand the proper place of the apophatic dimensions of classic Christian thought (as already briefly discussed in the Prelude). Once there is a full and ready acknowledgement that to make claims about *God* involves a fundamental submission to mystery and unknowing, a form of unknowing more fundamental even than the positive accession of contentful revelation, the 'onto-theological' charge loses its edge. Indeed, one might say it becomes a mere shadow-boxing. For 'God', by definition, cannot be an extra item in the universe (a very big one) to be known, and so controlled, by human intellect, will, or imagination. God is, rather, that without which there would be nothing at all; God is the source and

sustainer of all being, and, as such, the dizzying mystery encountered in the act of contemplation as precisely the ‘blanking’ of the human ambition to knowledge, control, and mastery. To know God is unlike any other knowledge; indeed, it is more truly to *be* known, and so transformed.

So, if the ‘onto-theological’ charge misses its mark, is its accusation simply ‘much ado about nothing’? Not exactly; for its concerns rightly chide those forms of theology which show an inadequate awareness of the *sui generis* nature of the divine, and of the ever-present dangers of idolatry. In short, systematic theology without appropriately apophatic sensibilities is still potentially subject to its criticism. The question then presses: what constitutes such an ‘appropriately apophatic sensibility’? Can this be gained simply by taking thought (or, rather, by taking thought and then negating it)? Or is it that this first accusation against systematic theology has rightly isolated a deeper problem than that of mere intellectual or semantic hygiene – that is, the modern problem of the dissociation of theology from *practices* of un-mastery?

It is here that one of the key dimensions of my proposed theological method becomes crucial. As I have already argued, systematic theology without contemplative and ascetic practice comes with the danger of rending itself void; for theology in its proper sense is always implicitly *in via* as practical. It comes, that is, with the urge, the fundamental desire, to seek God’s ‘face’ and yet to have that seeking constantly checked, corrected, and purged. The mere intellectual acknowledgement of human finitude is not enough (and in any case is all too easily forgotten); the false humility of a theological ‘liberalism’ which remakes God as it wishes under the guise of a Kantian nescience is equally unsatisfactory; it is the actual *practice* of contemplation that is the condition of a new ‘knowing in unknowing’. It must involve the stuff of

learned bodily enactment, sweated out painfully over months and years, in duress, in discomfort, in bewilderment, as well as in joy and dawning recognition. Apophatic theology, in its proper sense, then, can never be mere verbal play, deferral of meaning, or the simple addition of negatives to positive ('cataphatic') claims. Nor, on the other hand, can it be satisfied with the dogmatic 'liberal' denial that God in Godself can be known *at all*: it is not 'mysterious' in *this* sense. For contemplation is the unique, and wholly *sui generis*, task of seeking to know, and speak of God, unknowingly; as Christian contemplation, it is also the necessarily bodily practice of dispossession, humility, and effacement which, in the Spirit, causes us to learn incarnationally, and only so, the royal way of the Son to the Father.

The first, 'onto-theological', objection to systematics therefore does still have continuing point, even as one answers it. It serves as a reminder that the problem of idolatry is an enduring one, and that it can never be dealt with by mere mental fiat or a false sense of intellectual control. It draws attention, too, to the fact that not all theology adequately reflects on its apophatic duties: insofar as it fails in them, it is indeed implicated in 'onto-theological' temptation. Finally, it hints therefore also at the need to make important distinctions between different levels, or types, of approach to doctrinal truth (a point which will become clearer once I have examined all three of the contemporary criticisms of systematic theology). That is, there are different ways in which doctrines can be purveyed, whether by symbolic power, indirect allusion, or analytic clarity; but even when these are judiciously combined, there can be no intrinsic guarantee of an effective apophatic reminder in any attempt to speak truly of God – unless such reminders are *practised*. One of the rightful requirements of systematic theology, then, is for it to indicate what sorts of different 'forms' of expression it is using, and

for what purpose, and how such forms relate to intentional practices of un-mastery. Only thus can one consciously guard against the ‘onto-theological’ danger.

The second charge against systematic theology is less to do with technical issues of speech about God, and more about falsely generalizing strategies of power. The social theorists who have decried ‘hegemony’ are rightly calling attention to ways in which powerful discourses, especially ones that aspire to a total picture, can occlude or marginalize the voices of those who are already oppressed, or are being pushed into a state of subjection. ‘System’ here tends to connote ‘systemic’ oppression, deep-seated political violence, or abuse; ‘hegemonic’ discourses – consciously or unconsciously – seek to justify such oppression. Does systematic theology do this too?

The short answer, again, is that it certainly can do, and most manifestly has done in many contexts in Christian tradition. Liberation theology, in all its guises, witnesses to the felt perception that classic, official church theology (systematic or otherwise) has often failed in any sustained theological response to problems of social and political oppression. And that ‘gender’, ‘race’, and ‘class’, amongst other categories related to such oppression, are still matters not generally discussed in systematic theology, is a telling comment on the state of the undertaking. So long as such topics are excluded a priori from systematic theology’s *loci* for discussion, or pushed aside as irrelevant to theological truth, the charge that they are being occluded from theological sight will continue to have a point.

But the method of *théologie totale* is again of crucial significance here, and this is for at least two reasons. First, the ascetic practices of contemplation are themselves indispensable means of a *true* attentiveness to the despised or marginalized ‘other’. It is easy, from a privileged position, to be morally righteous about justice for the oppressed, while actually drowning out their voices with the din of

one's own high-sounding plans for reform. Likewise, there is much talk of the problem of attending to the otherness of the 'other' in contemporary post-Kantian ethics and post-colonial theory; but there is very little about the intentional and embodied practices that might enable such attention. And this is particularly ironic, given the claims of (largely secular) post-colonial theorists to speak for deeply religious populations. The moral and epistemic stripping that is endemic to the act of contemplation is a vital key here: its practised self-emptying inculcates an attentiveness that is beyond merely good political intentions. Its practice is more discomforting, more destabilizing to settled presumptions, than a simple intentional *design* on empathy.

Secondly, the method of *théologie totale* (as has been seen, and will be explored further in the next chapter) is not only founded in ascetic practices of attention, but also rooted in an exploration of the many mediums and levels at which theological truth may be engaged. It is in this sense that it deserves the appellation *totale*: not as a totalizing assault on worldly power, but as an attempt to do justice to every level, and type, of religious apprehension and its appropriate mode of expression. Thus it is devoted precisely to the excavation and evaluation of what has previously been neglected: to theological fieldwork in a variety of illuminating social and political contexts (not merely those of privilege, in fact especially not); to religious cultural productions of the arts and the imagination; to neglected or sidelined texts in the tradition; and to examination of the differences made to theology by such factors as gender, class, or race. In short, *théologie totale* makes the bold claim that the more systematic one's intentions, the more necessary the exploration of such dark and neglected corners; and that, precisely as a theology *in via*, *théologie totale* continually risks destabilization and redirection. In an important sense, then, this form of systematic theology must

always also remain, in principle, *unsystematic* – if by that one means open to the possibility of risk and challenge. This playful oxymoron (‘unsystematic systematics’) applies just to the extent that the undertaking renders itself persistently vulnerable to interruptions from the unexpected – through its radical practices of attention to the Spirit.

And that point forms a natural transition to the third, and last, charge made against systematic thinking: that it is intrinsically ‘phallogocentric’ (that is, that it operates intellectually in a mode symbolically linked to the male body); and that it is inherently repressive of ‘feminine’ imagination, creativity, or of the destabilization of ordered thinking that may arise from the unconscious. This objection will make little sense unless one is familiar with the thought forms and presumptions of French post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory; and thus one’s immediate response to this last critique must be that it precisely *begs the question* of one’s assumed theory of gender (an issue I am about to tackle at greater length in the last part of this chapter). However, there is something irreducibly important at stake in this charge: it concerns the embodied nature of all theological thinking.

For this last critique starts from the assumption that there is a distinctively ‘feminine’ mode of reflection (termed the ‘semiotic’ in Lacanian terminology), which is linked to the female body and female sexuality, and incapable of capture – without destructive ‘phallogocentric’ distortion – in *clearly enunciated* forms. To attempt systematics in such forms would thus be an intrinsic offence to ‘feminine’ sensibility, and would crush the creative destabilizations that are unique to the realm of the semiotic. This particular understanding of the gender divide, we should note, can come in more or less hardened forms of dogmatism. The more subtle exponents of this school of thought by no means intend an essentialist view of

gender (which would link female bodies inexorably and normatively to certain kinds of creative, but non-analytic, thought). Instead, they wish to draw attention to the undeniable cultural dominance of 'male' thinking, and its repressive and distorting effects on both women and men: if the so-called 'feminine imaginary' is accorded no worth, they argue, then psychic life remains distorted and stultifying for all.

The main problem with this line of thought is that it risks reinstituting the problem it seeks to resolve. If the gender division is so strongly bound to genital shape and symbolism, and so disjunctively construed, then a pessimistic ideology tends to dominate: the so-called 'feminine imaginary' can never, it is averred, be brought into effective play in the realm of existing systematic discussion. Instead it has to found its own, distinct, form of discourse. It is as if such pessimism, and such dogmatized gender dualism, reconsigns the 'feminine' to an eternal marginalization, ironically recreating the conditions of powerlessness from which it arose. Semiotic explosions may become the only means of redress: at best, they are the deliciously subversive ripostes of the marginalized ('noises off', as it were), but never harbingers of actual psychic or social change. Systematic theology, on this view, remains an irredeemably 'male' undertaking.

But it is to address such a false disjunction as this that the contemplative method of *théologie totale* is, once again, attuned. As the last part of this chapter will now seek to display, it is possible to acknowledge the full *theological* significance of bodily and gendered difference (in a sense to be discussed), but to avoid the stuckness of a theory in which the so-called semiotic realm fails in any substantial or transformative impact on the systematic. For the contemplative method of *théologie totale* of course already welcomes what is here called the semiotic at more than one level: it welcomes

it in the very act of contemplation, in which practices of unknowing precisely court the realm of the unconscious; and it welcomes it in the arts, as a way into those levels of doctrinal truth, via the imagination and aesthetic artifacts, that more drily intellectual theology often misses. What this third critique of systematics has so rightly seen, then – that gender and bodily difference cannot be irrelevant to systematics – is capable of a different response than the dismissive one that it itself envisages.

THE TANGLED ROOT OF DESIRE

I have now surveyed the three major contemporary objections to systematic theology, fully acknowledging their force. But I have also suggested that a contemplative approach to systematics, by virtue of its very practices of un-mastery, is one capable of addressing the deeper issues raised. Indeed, if I am right, it can change the terms of the debate in such a way that seemingly irresolvable dilemmas in secular approaches to these problems may be fruitfully addressed.

For the three objections to the task of systematic theology turn out to have a shared, or at least tangled, root. Each presumes that the systematician idolatrously *desires* mastery: a complete understanding of God, a regnant position in society, or a domination of the gendered ‘other’; and each presumes that the same systematician will thereby abuse his knowledge, his power, or his ‘male’ mode of thinking, for purposes of intellectual, social, or sexual dominance. The deeper issues, then, involve the insidious entanglement of knowledge, power, and gender. But their shared root, let me now suggest, is the yet deeper problem of *desire*. It is the idolatrous desire to know all that fuels ‘onto-theology’; it is the imperious desire to dominate that inspires ‘hegemony’; it is the ‘phallogocentric’ desire to

conquer that represses the 'feminine'. To speak theologically: *unredeemed* desire is at the root of each of these challenges to the systematic task. It is to this deeper problem that I must now attend.

I said at the beginning of this chapter that systematic theology cannot credibly go on without urgent attention to matters of desire, sex, sexuality, and gender. I am now in a better position to say why this might be so, and how these particular issues might themselves be ordered and rooted – in the category of desire itself. On the one hand, the contemplative task, which rightly sustains systematics, is itself a progressive modulator and refiner of human desire: in its naked longing for God, it lays out all its other desires – conscious and unconscious – and places them, over time, into the crucible of divine desire. (Sexual desire, from this contemplative perspective, is thus drawn into an inexorable tether with all other desires, judged by its approximation, or lack thereof, to the purity of divine charity.) On the other hand, the tumultuous obsessions of a secularized and sex-saturated culture, and the current political intensities of debates over gender, make it imperative for the systematician to give *theological* thematization to these divisive and contested topics. In the Prelude I already suggested that desire, when understood as rooted in the divine, could thus be seen as more basic a category than physical 'sex'. I now want to extend that analysis to the issue of gender, and to hypothesize that *desire is also more fundamental than gender*; and that the key to the secular riddle of gender can lie only in its connection to the doctrine of a trinitarian God.

WHY DOES GENDER MATTER?

But what *is* gender, in any case, and why does it matter? To contemporary secular theorists of gender, first, it matters intensely, since for them it is the powerful symbolic means by which culture

slices humanity normatively into *two* (and only two), and thereby imposes, by continually repeated rituals of reinforcement (both conscious and unconscious), an oppressive and restricted form of life on those who do not fit the binary alternatives. Gender is – on this view – implicitly linked to oppression. Only ‘performative’ acts of public dissent from the so-called ‘gender binary’ may hope to shift its cultural hold – by a form of acted-out resistance.

To biblical fundamentalists and conservatives, by contrast, and especially to the anti-gay lobby, gender ‘matters’ no less intensely: not only is modern ‘heterosexuality’ read as normatively prescribed by the Bible, but a particular, subordinationist, understanding of the relation of female to male is seen to follow as well.

There is another possible theological approach to gender, however, which by no means decries biblical authority, indeed still takes it as primary; but it sets the exegesis of complex scriptural texts in full relation to tradition, philosophical analysis, and ascetic practice. Here gender ‘matters’ primarily because it is about *differentiated, embodied relationship* – first and foremost to God, but also to others; and its meaning is therefore fundamentally given in relation to the human’s role as made in the ‘image of God’ (Genesis 1. 26–7). Gender ‘matters’ to systematic theology, too then, insofar as it is a crucial dimension of its *theological* analysis of the human: to fail to chart the differences and performances of gender would be to ignore one of the most profound aspects of human experience, whether felt as joy or as curse. Where this approach differs from secular gender theory, let me now suggest, is in three crucial areas, which transform its capacity to deal with seemingly insoluble dilemmas for the secular realm of discussion.

Whereas secular gender theory argues, and agonizes, about how it can shift and transform cultural presumptions about gender that are often unconsciously and unthinkingly replicated, a contemplative theology *in via* has at its disposal, first, theological concepts of creation,

fall, and redemption which place the performances of gender in a spectrum of existential possibilities *between* despair and hope. What one might call the fallen, 'worldly' view of gender relations is open to the future, and to change; it is set in an unfolding, diachronic narrative both of individual spiritual maturation and of societal transformation.

Secondly, and correlatively, a theological view of gender thereby also has an eschatological hope, one that it sees not as pious fiction or wish-fulfilment, but as firmly grounded in the events of Christ's incarnation and resurrection. Gender, in the sense just given, is ineradicable (I am always, even after death – assuming I believe in that possibility – a particular sort of 'differentiated, relational being'); but gender is not unchangeable: it too is *in via*. What is fallen can be redeemed and sanctified – indeed rendered sacramental by participation in Christ. In this sense, gender may be seen not merely as a locus of oppression, but just as much as the potential vehicle of embodied salvation.

Third, then, and most fundamentally, gender is understood differently for a contemplative asceticism precisely because it claims through its practices of devotion to encounter and embrace a holy *reality*, a reality revealed as three (yet thereby transformative of any two).⁷ What contemporary gender theory jargonistically calls 'performativity' and 'ritualization' – whether as reiteration of a repressive gender regime, or as a 'destabilization' of it – finds its *theological* counterpart in the *sui generis* 'performances' of contemplation. These performances, however, are not primarily intended as acts of resistance to worldly oppression (although they will give courage for such!); and nor are they therefore merely human strategies of resistance. Rather, they are acts of 'submission' to a unique power beyond human power – and, as

⁷ I shall explain the relation of 'three' and 'two' in the next section. The metaphysical realism in my approach is important: it is not *we* who fix this problem of fallen gender, as I understand it, but God.

such, are of course already ‘gendered’, in a particular and unique sense denoting relationship to God. What makes *this* gendering ‘different’ from worldly gender, then, is its being rendered labile to the logic and flow of trinitarian, divine desire, its welcoming of the primary interruption of the Spirit, and its submission to contemplative unknowing so that the certainties of this world (including the supposed certainties of fallen views of gender) can be remade in the incarnate likeness of Christ. Gender (embodied difference) is here not to be eradicated, note, but to be transformed; it still ‘matters’, but only because God desires it to matter and can remake it in the image of his Son.

GENDER, THE TRINITY, AND INCARNATION

Threeness and twoness. Let me reflect a little more at the close of this chapter on the symbolic significance of these numbers for Christian doctrine, but also for gender. I can only spell out baldly here a thesis that may seem unfamiliar and strange, but which will gather impetus theologically throughout the coming chapters.

I have already intimated in the Prelude how this book is going to approach the early doctrine of God as Trinity in a distinctive way. The claim will be made in greater detail and substance later, especially in Chapter 3, that prayer (and especially prayer of a non-discursive sort, whether contemplative or charismatic) is the chief context in which the *irreducible* threeness of God becomes humanly apparent to the Christian. It does so because – as one ceases to set the agenda and allows room for God to be God – the sense of the *human* impossibility of prayer becomes the more intense (see Romans 8. 26), and drives one to comprehend the necessity of God’s own prior activity in it. Strictly speaking, it is not I who autonomously prays, but God (the Holy Spirit) who prays in me, and so answers the eternal call of the ‘Father’, drawing me by various painful degrees into the newly expanded life of

'Sonship'. There is, then, an inherent reflexivity in the divine, a ceaseless outgoing and return of the desiring God; and insofar as I welcome and receive this reflexivity, I find that it is the Holy Spirit who 'interrupts' my human monologue to a (supposedly) monadic God;⁸ it is the Holy Spirit who finally thereby causes me to see God no longer as patriarchal threat but as infinite tenderness; but it is also the Holy Spirit who first painfully darkens my prior certainties, enflames and checks my own desires, and so invites me ever more deeply into the life of redemption in Christ. In short, it is this 'reflexivity in God', this Holy Spirit, that makes incarnate life *possible*.

So when, from this perspective in prayer, I count three in God, the Holy Spirit cannot be a *mere* 'third'. The Spirit cannot be an add-on, an 'excess', or a 'go-between' to what is already established as a somehow more privileged dyad (the 'Father' and 'Son'). Instead, the Holy Spirit is intrinsic to the very make-up of the Father–Son relationship from all eternity; the Spirit, moreover, is that without which there would be no *incarnated* Son at all, and – by extension – no life of Sonship into which we, too, might enter by participation. The Spirit, then, is what interrupts the fallen worldly order and infuses it with the divine question, the divine lure, the divine life.

So this irreducible threeness in God cannot be insignificant for the matter of gendered twoness, since the human is precisely made 'in God's (trinitarian) image', and destined to be restored to that image. It must be, then, that in this fallen world, one lives, in some sense, *between* twoness and its transfiguring interruption; so one is not, as in secular gender theory, endlessly and ever subject to the debilitating falseness of fallen gender, fallen twoness. In fact, in Christ, I meet the human One who, precisely in the Spirit, has

⁸ It is important to underscore that *this* 'interruption' does not bludgeon or suppress the human, but 'comes to our aid' as the Holy Spirit.

effected that interruptive transfiguration of twoness. He has done so by crossing the boundary between another ‘twoness’ more fundamental even than the twoness of gender: the ontological twoness of the transcendent God and the created world. In crossing that boundary in the incarnation, Christ does not re-establish the boundary as before, but nor – significantly – does he destroy it; rather, we might say that he ‘transgresses’ it in the Spirit, infusing the created world anew with divinity. And just as, in the Spirit, he crosses that ontological twoness transformatively, but without obliteration of otherness, so – I now suggest, and analogously – the interruptive work of the trinitarian God does not obliterate the twoness of gender, either, but precisely renders it subject to the labile transformations of divine desire. Whatever this redeemed twoness is (and there are remaining mysterious dimensions to this question), it cannot be the stuck, fixed, repressive twoness of the *fallen* ‘gender binary’.

So one might say that there are two different sorts of ‘difference’ that the fundamental doctrines of Christianity (Trinity and Incarnation) hold before one, as symbolically and theologically relevant for the ‘differences’ of gender. One is the ‘difference’ of the three in God – different but *equal*, a difference only of relation and not of distinct activities or powers. The other is the quite different ‘difference’ between God and the world, a fundamental line of ontological difference that has been crossed and overcome in the Incarnation, yet also not obliterated. The Christian tradition has, of course, been constantly tempted to figure the difference of gender straightforwardly on the latter difference: to align ‘masculinity’ with God and ‘femininity’ with the world (and so to subordinate women to men, while tacitly undermining their status as fully redeemed). More recently, some feminist theology has attempted – in reaction – to model gender on the former difference –

straightforwardly to *emulate* a trinitarian 'equality in difference'. The position proposed here is that neither of these more familiar alternatives is possible, nor even obviously mandated by the complex authorities of Scripture and tradition. Rather, in the case of human gender there is a subtle transformation of both models caused by their intersection: the 'fixed' fallen differences of worldly gender are transfigured precisely by the interruptive activity of the Holy Spirit, drawing gender into trinitarian purgation and transformation. *Twoness, one might say, is divinely ambushed by threeness.*

This is *not*, I must strongly underscore in closing, a theory of a 'third gender', or a theory either of the insignificance, or obliteration, of gender. On the contrary, it is a theory about gender's mysterious and plastic openness to divine transfiguration.⁹

CONCLUSIONS

I wrote earlier, in the Prelude, that 'desire is the constellating category of selfhood, the ineradicable root of one's longing for God'. By the end of this complex chapter, I am now in a better position to see why I wish to say that this is so. Power, sex, and gender currently garner much attention in secular political, philosophical, and psychoanalytic discourses; and in this chapter I have acknowledged how revealing are the criticisms of systematic theology that emerge from those discourses. But a *theological* analysis such as I propose puts desire at the root – both anthropologically in the human, and theologically in the divine. Desire, I now suggest again – even fallen desire – is the precious

⁹ Ascetic materials from the period of early Christian monasticism give indications of a similar view – or complex constellation of views – abroad in the early church, most of them inspired by Galatians 3. 28. It should not be assumed that the only view of gender transformation then canvassed was that of ascetic women 'becoming male' – although, in a complex range of alternative possibilities, this was indeed one dominant trope. I shall return to this topic in Chapter 6.

clue woven into the crooked human heart that ever reminds it of its relatedness and its source.¹⁰

But to say that ‘desire is more fundamental than gender’ is not thereby to make gender (once understood as ‘differentiated embodied relationship’) *insignificant*: it does indeed ‘matter’. But what it has to say is that gender is not static, not fixed into the seemingly immovable stuckness of what secular theory gloomily calls ‘the gender binary’. Rather, it is made redemptively labile – subject to endless reformulations one can scarcely imagine at the beginning of the spiritual journey. And this occurs precisely by its submission to something more fundamental: the interruptive desire of the trinitarian God for fallen creation. In the ‘impossibility’ of the prayer of contemplation, in which the Spirit cracks open the human heart to this new future, divine desire purgatively reformulates human desire. It follows that all the other problems of power, sex, and gender with which contemporary theory struggles so notably cannot be solved, I dare to say – whether by human political power, violent fiat, or even subversive deviousness or ritualized revolt – without such prior surrender to the divine.

This is clearly an audacious claim, but it is not one that is enunciated in a social or political vacuum. The method of *théologie totale*, as is now becoming clear, puts contemplation at its heart, but spirals out to acknowledge the complexity of the entanglement of the secular and spiritual realms for those who dare to practise it. For there is no escape from such messy entanglement. *Théologie totale*, as this chapter has shown, insists on the sweated-out significance of embodied (and thus gendered, and socially located) contemplation, not mere verbal play or abstract thought. It attends to the different *levels* and *forms* at which

¹⁰ It follows that the basic view of sin in this systematics is of misdirected desire – desire missing its goal (*hamartanein* in the Greek). The implications of this view of sin will be given fuller attention in volumes II and III of this systematics.

doctrine may be purveyed, aware of the ways in which intellect, affect, and imagination are progressively magnetized by the contentful, cataphatic claims of a variety of mediums, yet how they are also constantly judged and purged by the apophatic act of contemplation. But just as importantly, *théologie totale* is keenly aware of the social locations and worldly power – or powerlessness – of those who undertake this ascetic task. The examination of such variables, as I must now go on to show, is a crucial part of its attempt to probe a 'total' theological picture.

Not that there is any fantasy of mastery here in such an attempt at 'totality': the submission of contemplation is, and remains, prior. Yet how, then, is such submission not just mere human *subjection*, a false consciousness wrapped in religious robes? How is it not yet another (subtle, but deluded) capitulation to worldly powers? To these questions I must now urgently attend, and so reveal the remaining methodological features of my 'unsystematic systematics'.

* * *

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

THE CATEGORY OF 'SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY'

The term 'systematic theology' is a modern one and is generally thought to have been used for the first time by Bartholomaeus Keckermann (1571?–1608) in his *Systema SS Theologiae, tribus libris adornatum* (Hanoviae, Apud Guilielmum Antonium, 1602). Earlier, celebrated accounts of Christian faith given in an ordered manner come in a remarkable variety of genres, but include, as discussed in this chapter (and supplied here in English translation): Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (London: SPCK, 1936); John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, in John of Damascus, *Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase (FC 37; New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), 165–406; Peter Lombard, *The*

Sentences, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2007–); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. various (60 vols.; Cambridge University Press, 2006); John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (2 vols.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960); Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (2nd edn; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75); Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (London: DLT, 1978); and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (8 vols.; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982–9), *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (5 vols.; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988–98), and *Theo-Logic* (3 vols.; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000–5).

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AND GENDER

One must first remark on significant facts of omission. Some of the most eminent and influential systematicians of the twentieth century do not regard gender as worthy of any sustained comment or analysis, for example: Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991–8); Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (2 vols.; Oxford University Press, 1997–9); Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

In contrast, Karl Barth devoted several sections of his *Church Dogmatics* to expounding a subordinationist view of female gender based on biblical prototypes for human nature. See especially: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), vol. III/1, 203–6, 288–329; vol. III/2, 285–324.

But it is the Protestant systematician Moltmann, and the Roman Catholic von Balthasar, who have made gender intrinsic to their very notions of *God*. See especially: Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981), and Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *Humanity in God* (London: SCM Press, 1984); compare Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vols. III and IV, and, ‘Women

Priests?', in *New Elucidations* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 187–98. Ironically, and despite their very different modes of applying gender to the inner life of God, both these theologians smuggle similar 'Romantic' visions of 'femininity' into their accounts. For a critique, see my essays 'The Woman at the Altar: Cosmological Disturbance or Gender Fluidity?', *Anglican Theological Review* 86 (2004), 75–93 (on von Balthasar), and 'The Trinity and Gender Reconsidered', in Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker, eds., *God's Life in Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 133–42 (on Moltmann).

L'HISTOIRE TOTALE AS BACKGROUND TO 'THÉOLOGIE TOTALE'

The term '*histoire totale*' ('total', or holistic, history) is associated with the Annales School of French historians, so called following the journal *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale* (1929–), which remains its principal organ. It was one of the founders of the journal, Lucien Febvre, who coined the term '*histoire totale*' or '*histoire tout court*'. The approach of the school aimed to uncover the thick textures in which historical events are couched, and in particular they brought social scientific methods to bear in order to provide fuller understandings of the contexts of history and its links with the present. A celebrated example of this approach is Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1274–1324* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980). For a full treatment of this historiographical school see André Burguière, *The Annales School: An Intellectual History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009). It should be clear in my account of *théologie totale*, however, that I do not share all the methodological presumptions of *histoire totale* (which themselves have been controversial amongst historians). In particular, I carefully resist any straightforward reduction of theological categories or explanations to social science ones.

'ONTO-THEOLOGY' AND 'METAPHYSICS'

The now celebrated (but contentious) critique of classic Western 'metaphysics' mounted by Heidegger can be found in Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 2002). Marion has taken up the Heideggerian critique and attempted an ingenious solution via 'apophatic', revelatory theology in Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without*

Being: Hors Texte (University of Chicago Press, 1995); he was later forced to admit that he had falsely included Thomas Aquinas in the 'onto-theological' charge: see Jean-Luc Marion, 'Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theology', in Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard, eds., *Mystics: Presence and Aporia* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 38–74. At the other end of the theological spectrum, the American 'liberal' tradition, strongly influenced by Kant, has continued to do a form of speculative metaphysics while insisting that its status can only be that of human 'imaginative construction', God-in-Godself being radically shrouded in 'mystery': see Gordon D. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), and his later *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

THEOLOGY AND 'HEGEMONY'

Antonio Gramsci first used the term 'hegemony' in 1926 in his *Notes on the Southern Question* (see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings 1921–26* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1978), 443); he continued to discuss the theme in his *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), blending themes from Nietzsche and Marx. For a secondary analysis, see Chantal Mouffe, 'Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci', in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 168–204. Theologians concerned about 'totalizing' approaches to state power have also been drawn in recent decades to the work of Michel Foucault and his account of how prisons and hospitals can patrol populations in the modern state: see especially Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995), and Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

Whilst classic 'liberation theology' drew controversially on socialist and Marxist analysis, as well as on biblical sources, to enunciate a 'preferential option for the poor' (see especially Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (rev. edn; London: SCM Press, 2001); and Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1976)), more recent 'post-colonial' thought has cast the spotlight on personal identity and the problems of 'agency': see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg, eds., *Marxism*

and the *Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313; and Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, eds., *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (New York: Routledge, 1996). In this context of postmodern multiple contestations of power and identity, many theologians have been attracted to the ethical thought of Emmanuel Lévinas and his insistence that the 'face' of the 'other' makes an irreducible moral claim on our humanity, despite all 'differences': see Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), and *Humanism of the Other* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003). Problems remain, however, as I argue in this chapter, if true recognition of the 'other' is blocked by an incapacity to *attend* to 'difference' in a disciplined, practised, manner.

THEOLOGY AND POST-FREUDIAN FEMINISMS

Post-Freudian feminisms in France require the reader to understand something of the work of Lacan, and his interpretation of Freud, as background to these feminists' critique: see Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), and the excellently clear Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan: An Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985) also provides a useful way into Lacan's thought for the English reader. Notions of 'symbolic' and 'semiotic', with their associated connotations of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', and their connections to the physical body, are here carefully explained in ways which head off the common charge of 'gender essentialism'. Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), Margaret Whitford, ed., *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), and Susan Sellers, ed., *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (London: Routledge, 1994) provide useful compendia of three of the movement's most celebrated exponents. Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester University Press, 1998) mounts a sustained case, for the English-speaking reader, of the implications of Irigaray's thought for the discipline of philosophy of religion. I respond with a sympathetic, but ultimately critical, account of Irigaray's and Jantzen's philosophical projects in 'Feminism and Analytic Philosophy

of Religion', in William Wainwright, ed., *The Oxford Handbook to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 494–525.

THEOLOGY AND NORTH AMERICAN GENDER THEORY

In contrast to the dominance of French feminisms in contemporary feminist theory of continental Europe, and the critique in this discussion of so-called 'phallocentrism', recent North American gender theory has been predominantly concerned with gay and lesbian rights, and with the problem of what Judith Butler has called 'heteronormativity' – the cultural imposition of 'heterosexuality' as the only acceptable sexual norm in society. According to Butler, only ritualized acts of dissent from such 'normativity' can begin to shift this imposition: see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993); *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), the last book explicitly tackling the medical and cultural problems of sex changes and the phenomenon of 'intersexuality'. I have myself suggested that Butler's early work ironically parallels, in some regards, the 'gender fluidity' exemplified in some early Christian ascetic literature, while lacking the substantial eschatological hope evidenced there (see my *Powers and Submissions: Philosophy, Spirituality and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), ch. 9). As I argue further in this chapter and beyond, however, 'sexual identity' or 'orientation', when dislocated from a nexus of *final* spiritual and theological meanings, becomes curiously pedestaled and obsessional. Arguably, the current anxieties in this area can only be properly adjudicated in the context of a rich *theology* of desire more generally.