General Conclusion

The climates of thinking in and against which women are exhorted to invent the next steps towards a sense of self-identity might best be described as embattled. Feminist subjectivity fights on two fronts. On the one hand, the adversary is a projection of male subjectivity under which women’s identity is subsumed. On the other hand, the assertion of female subjectivity contends against a deconstructionist undermining of subjectivity. Given such a background, Elaine Graham suggests that self-identity must be invented but not too definitively. The challenge, she says, is to cast bodies as a kind of vantage point for experience while lending diversity and provisionality to such accounts. The terms ‘provisionality’ and ‘diversity’ indicate that the steps towards self-identity for women are envisaged to be more like questions than answers. Luce Irigaray gives this sense of ‘provisionality’ an eschatological flavour. She posits an undefined flowering for women: ‘something still held in reserve within the silence of female history’ that ‘keeps the future open’.¹ In this kind of approach it is the lack of definition that appears to be definitive.

‘Provisionality’ or lack of definition may be surmised to stem from a response to the two key challenges with which feminism is confronted. Male subjectivity is perceived to have defined female identity: consequently, the remedy is to eschew definition. In this regard, a deconstructionist undermining of definition might seem less of a foe than an ally. But the quest for women’s self-identity is based on a more robust assertion of subjectivity than a fully deconstructionist position could sustain. The provisional nature of a quest finds expression in a projection of the imagination arising from the positive assertion of female agency. The next steps must be invented,

¹ Irigaray, ‘Sexual Difference’ in The Irigaray Reader, p. 176.
or ‘remythologized’ to use Sallie McFague’s terminology. The silence of female history is said to find a voice in feminized mythology in which women are free from the definition of external reality, in particular a reality seen to be mediated on male terms.

The weakness of such an approach is that it makes no claim beyond assertion and disembodied projection. Projection of the inner world, far from overcoming soul-body dualism, would seem to exacerbate it further. It is not the rational soul of the Enlightenment, however, but the unchecked Romantic soul that appears to be fostered through such ‘remythologizing’. Grace Jantzen’s surmise about the possibility of the *imago Dei* in which context the actual existence of a God is not the main concern, indicates an orientation towards a divinised ‘horizon’ that is at the same time a disengagement from the object of orientation. This sort of unanchored longing seems characteristic of deconstructionist thinking: Jacques Derrida expresses a kind of Romantic nostalgia for an unobtainable linguistic purity, in symbolic biblical terms.

In such a context the *imago Dei*, applied to women, is no more than a humanly constructed myth. The myth is demythologized in the sense of disavowing external reference. Male identity, insofar as it is connected with the *imago Dei*, has a different history: identity has been received from what is claimed to come from outside. As such, it has a cogency that a feminist search for identity cannot assert. At the same time a history of interpreting the *imago Dei* has favoured male self-identity while women’s identity, in varying ways, has been defined by and through men. This thesis argues that the remedy for women is not non-definition, nor is it self-definition.
Rather, the way forward is a willingness to be defined by God through a reappraisal of what is meant by the *imago Dei*.

For key feminist theologians such a ‘next step’ would present a major change of direction. Unlike McFague who describes Jesus as a ‘parable of God’\(^2\) and Johnson who states that ‘Christ exists only pneumatologically’,\(^3\) this thesis takes seriously the biblical proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth is the Word or Wisdom of God Incarnate who is anointed as Messiah at his crucifixion and resurrected in his divine humanity as Bridegroom of the Church as Bride to be.\(^4\) Johnson argues against reducing ‘Christ’ to the historical individual Jesus of Nazareth\(^5\) but it is as historical individual that the Wisdom of God earns the title of Messiah.\(^6\) Johnson’s remark about Christ existing only as a corporate spiritual reality is made in the context of including women in the *imago Christi*. ‘Those who live the life of Christ,’ she says, ‘are icons of Christ’. But the spiritual inclusion of women ‘in Christ’ has never been at issue. What has been at issue is how women are made in the likeness of God in their embodied femaleness.

For some traditionalists, the sense in which the Wisdom of God earns the title of Christ or ‘anointed king’ in *her* incarnate and resurrected humanity may sound strange and even impermissible. For some feminists, on the other hand, the masculine noun

\(^2\) See McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, pp. 42-54. McFague presents this concept as a christology (the lower case ‘c’ is hers) from ‘below’.

\(^3\) Johnson, *SHE WHO IS*, p. 72. Johnson writes: ‘the whole Christ is a corporate personality, a relational reality, redeemed humanity that finds its way by the light of the historical narrative of Jesus’ compassionate, liberating love’.


\(^5\) Johnson, *SHE WHO IS*, p. 72.

\(^6\) Cf. Ian Crombie, ‘Theology and Falsification’, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 118: ‘Christ’s action on Palm Sunday when he rode into Jerusalem on an ass … was saying in effect: “What you are about to witness (namely my Passion, Death and Resurrection) is the coming of the Messianic King to claim his kingdom”.’
‘king’ may resonate with a dominating yet distant God. A masculine conception of God on such terms, while it may have influenced Christian tradition, may be surmised to owe more to the epistemological framework of the Aristotelian Unmoved Mover of medieval academia. Despite a plea by feminists, however, a subjectivist frame of reference would seem far from conducive to the contrary conception of a relational God. In McFague’s proposed models of God, for example, there can be no bridge between a human model and a God of the via negativa who may (or may not) exist beyond the projection. Against such formulations, this thesis argues that the bridge between God and humanity, found in the Wisdom of God who was made flesh, is also a key to the relational nature of gender.

While this thesis proposes something of a volte face in thinking about women, the ground covered is in many ways the same as that of current feminist writing, in that the quest for sexual difference, embodiment and relationship is taken seriously. Where it differs is in the method of the quest. The thesis argues for a divine ‘horizon’ that is actual, not projected, an identity that is received, not self-bestowed. The fulcrum of epistemology is not the Kantian subject nor is it a Rimbaud-style projection of the inner world. Rather, the imago Dei presupposes an epistemology of a covenantal meeting-ground between God and humanity.

Given the breadth of philosophical and literary reappraisal, the arguments presented in this thesis are of necessity complex. The first half of the thesis engages with the meaning of language in general and biblical language in particular, the second half with the effect of meaning, or lack of meaning, on identity. Meaning in theology is

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7 See Johnson, SHE WHO IS, p. 192.
not unconnected with linguistic meaning in general. Barth affirms that the nineteenth century focussed theological attention on a religious a priori or human capacity to ‘sense and taste the infinite’, with the consequence that theology engaged in ‘demythologizing’ (i.e. disowning its origin in the linguistic reference of the biblical narrative). A similar process dating from the nineteenth century would seem to have focussed linguistic attention on a subjectivist source of meaning for language while failing to acknowledge, if not denying, an external metaphysic of ‘presence’. The fact that subjectivity has itself become undermined serves to demonstrate a current loss of faith in meaning. A feminist search for identity attempts to regain ‘myth’ and meaning, but on what terms?

E. L. Mascall asks: ‘Is it possible for statements expressed in human language to mean anything when made about God, that is to say, are theological statements meaningful or meaningless?’ He adds, ‘The relevance of this discussion to the questions raised by the logical positivists will be immediately clear to those who have any acquaintance with their works.’ The Preface to New Essays in Philosophical Theology states that, ‘Logical positivists used to reject all theology holus-bolus as so much meaningless metaphysics’. Mascall introduces the function of the doctrine of analogy on the grounds of the persistence of human talk about God, in spite of ‘all that has been said by positivists, logical and other’. Positivism, says Mascall, is a sort of ‘metaphysical myopia’, adding wryly that in ‘the last resort it can be cast out only by prayer and fasting’.

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9 Mascall, Existence and Analogy, p. 97.
10 See p. vii.
11 Mascall, Existence and Analogy, p. 94.
12 Mascall, Existence and Analogy, p. 90.
Mascall could perhaps have extended his question to ask whether ‘metaphysical myopia’ deprives human language of meaning. One could point out, for example, that logical positivists relied linguistically on a metaphysic of ‘presence’ in denying meaning to metaphysics. But such difficulties are not confined to logical positivists. While ‘metaphysical myopia’ is problematic beyond theology, theologians are also prone to ‘metaphysical myopia’. In the mid twentieth century, Barth drew attention to a possible development of theological existentialism in the “‘overcoming of the Subject-Object-Scheme” recently proclaimed with such special enthusiasm’.13 In such a case, said Barth, detachment from ‘objectivising’ myth as advocated by ‘demythologizing’ might well give way to the fostering of ‘anthropocentric myth’. But a ‘remythologizing’ of this nature is not, as Barth pointed out, to speak of the living God.

How then can talk about the *imago Dei* function without ‘metaphysical myopia’? W. M. Swartley advocates an approach to biblical interpretation in which the text functions as a window.14 But he does not demonstrate how it is possible, philosophically speaking, for it to do so. A positivist would draw down a philosophical blind on any such window. ‘Demythologizing’ would agree that the blind must remain in place, in terms of picturing projected by ‘the religious idea’. Some feminist writers would also leave the philosophical blind in place, relegating anything beyond it to a religious *via negativa*. It is at this point that ‘remythologizing’ makes a philosophical appearance. Here, the view from the text is to be seen in terms of a projection onto the blind. At the same time such writers

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would claim that women are like God. But, according to their philosophical framework, it is at best an unverifiable possibility that women are like the God outside the window. Even if there were a likeness, proponents of this way of thinking would have no basis to assert it. What they can and do assert is a likeness between women and the projected picture on the blind.

While metaphysical myopia of a positivist kind has not intentionally characterized traditional thinking about the gendered *imago Dei*, this is not to say that interpretation has consistently gazed through the relevant textual windows. Despite the embodied implication of ‘male and female’ in Genesis 1:26-27, a history of non-physical interpretation has somewhat distorted thinking about the *imago Dei*. Emphasis has centred on what C. S. Lewis terms ‘nearness-of-approach’ rather than ‘nearness-by-likeness’. But the spiritual equality of ‘nearness-of-approach’ does not explicate how the sexual diversity of humanity is made in God’s image. In fact, traditional interpretation has tended to qualify spiritual equality, to give ‘nearness-of approach’ a masculine flavour as Augustine does, or, as in Calvin’s interpretation, to posit spiritual equality alongside temporal inequality in which women’s ‘nearness-by-likeness’ operates through the agency of men.

In ‘patriarchal’ culture, according to Irigaray, women were ‘essentialized’ as ‘the other of the same’.15 In response, says Graham, Irigaray develops femininity as ‘an essentialist, metaphysical category beyond patriarchal language and culture’.16 But,

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in Irigaray’s method, femininity is also ‘essentialized’, i.e. projected onto the blind. This demonstrates the nature of the method. Projection produces an image of ‘the same’. Whatever is envisaged as an ‘other’ will tend to become an ‘other of the same’. In this sense, a projection of a divine ‘other’ will become the ‘other of the same’. While Irigaray depicts a ‘horizon of sexual difference’ in messianic terms, her method does not allow for the actuality of difference. Where there is no difference there can be no likeness, but only ‘the other of the same’.

Gendered human nature ‘as form of social relations’ is, says Graham, ‘thoroughly compatible with a Trinitarian model of God’. But the way in which human interpersonal relations interact with and are patterned on the Godhead cannot be apprehended while the Godhead remains ‘the other of the same’: anthropomorphic projection would, for example, exclude the possibility of the feminine Wisdom crossing over to become masculine in relation to the Church. This thesis maintains that gender relies on interaction with the ‘other’. There are two aspects to this. Epistemologically, the meaning behind gendered relations is received through the covenantal activity of the Word-Wisdom of God. Ontologically, male and female engage in a mutual interplay in a way that interleaves with, and is patterned on, divine mystery. The imago Dei enters into a mystery, not of esoteric projection but of divine interaction with human history, an interaction that deepens rather than lessens the mystery.

To remove a metaphysical blind and follow the symbolic direction of the image of God is to reclaim a way of thinking in which it is possible to speak of ‘other-centred

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17 Graham, Making The Difference, p. 223.
relationship’, ‘embodiment’ and even ‘myth’ beyond a mere projected possibility that there is some reality behind such thinking. A deconstructionist framework would drain the life-blood from these terms. By contrast, this thesis maintains that the gendered imago Dei is an embodied myth. Humanity as male and female is not less than verifiable by human senses in a positivist sense, but it is more. Mystery surrounds and impregnates the mundane: that is the myth. Gender is sacramental and therefore priestly in offering access to a higher reality. The higher reality is a pattern of relations, complex yet structured, in which human gender participates. Gendered relations are other-centred, flexible to the extent of male and female sometimes exchanging places, yet operating in an ordered arrangement. The musical metaphor of counterpoint comes closest perhaps to describing the relationship of the sexes. Male and female play different tunes, each weaving in and out of the other. Each provides a harmony to the other but is also a melody in its own right.

Irigaray writes that sexual difference ‘is one of the questions, if not the question to be thought in our age’. Sexual difference, she says ‘is probably that issue in our own age which, if thought, might be our “salvation”’. Irigaray’s emphasis on the importance of sexual difference runs counter to Ruether’s contention that ‘most feminism today favors some version of an expanded unitary view of human nature’. But what kind of salvation does Irigaray have in mind? Her answer to the question of difference for women is couched in terms of non-definition in an epistemological vacuum. This thesis has argued for the question to be answered in terms of symbolic reference, suggesting that this may have the opposite effect of plugging the epistemological vacuum of postmodern thinking.

18 The Irigaray Reader, p. 164.
Although Elaine Graham does not discern it, the creation stories, in their symbolic significance, are seen to support her contention that ‘gender is a fundamental form of social organization’. This thesis has argued that further development occurs in the New Testament. Here the symbolic feminine role in marriage and church leadership is a sign of diversity to be interpreted within the breadth offered by the relationship of Priscilla and Aquila. Too often in the past emphasis on the category of ‘head’ for the man has led to underestimation of the glory brought by the woman to the relationship. Similarly the sense in which women enter into the physical relationship of the human mother with the God-man needs to be rediscovered.

‘Christian pastors,’ writes Paul Fiddes, ‘are “living symbols”’. He adds that the pastor is ‘a doorway into the triune life of God’. While he refers to pastors as ‘he or she’, Fiddes does not ask what it means for pastors as gendered living symbols to offer such a doorway. In the interview, cited in Chapter 8, the female bishop stated that ‘we’ve still got a long way to go’ in working out the symbolic meaning of women in church leadership, and the episcopacy in particular. The question is: in which way shall we travel? Shall we look outwards, as McFague recommends (although her method appears to preclude it), and upwards towards the living God (as in Chesterton’s presentation of the ‘truly Franciscan spirit’)? Or shall we look inwards and downwards (as in a sub-rational projection from a subjectivist ideology)? Shall we reject the symbolic feminine role as being a re-statement of a traditional social role for women, despite the symbolic reference to the divine level? Shall we wish to explore the significance of the God-bearer for women?

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20 Graham, Making The Difference, pp. 217; 223.
21 See Fiddes, Participating in God, pp. 294-295.
Verena Wright describes Pietro Annigoni’s 1961 painting *The Immaculate Heart of Mary*:

It is colourful, striking, strong: Mary’s eyes draw the viewer immediately to her gaze. There’s an insistence, an urgency there, but it is at the same time calm, steady, focussed. Here is a woman of strength in vulnerability (the open heart, the nurturing mother); a woman of integrity, whole in her fecund virginity and passionate maternity. A woman of colour, she is dressed in white with dark-red, gold-embroidered headdress and a cloak which disturbs the conventional blue in its blood-red edging – is that a spearmark in her side? …Mary evokes a multitasking versatility familiar to many women. She holds the baby in one hand and teaches with the other; she holds the serpent down with one foot, reclaiming and transforming the destructive energy of human violence into the healing anger which inspires action for justice … I think of the Great Mother archetype, struggling for justice for her people … I see Sophia-Wisdom, the transformative element of the feminine, seen in a mother who brings children to maturity by letting them go …

Mary may be seen in terms of the Great Mother archetype but, in a frame of reference that goes beyond ‘metaphysical myopia’, even this association must go beyond that of a living disposition of the subconscious mind in a Jungian sense. The meaning of 2 Timothy 2:15 in its significance for women of motherhood, and of the motherhood of Christ in particular, is perhaps yet to be explored.

The mystery of the *imago Dei* is demonstrated not least in the two-fold reversal of feminine-masculine and human-divine that occurs in the Incarnation. G. K. Chesterton’s poem ‘A Song of Gifts to God’ speculates about what the relationship to a human mother might have meant to Wisdom incarnate. The poem describes the attitude of Christ to the earthly gifts of the wise men. Such gifts will be received, says

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Chesterton, with ‘the high gratitude of God’ from the One ‘Who had a Father for all time, yet thanks Him for a Mother.’  

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