Chapter 1

Women, myth and meaning

Introduction

This thesis is about identity for women. To ask what it means for women to be created in God’s image entails prior questions about signification in general. If the term ‘imago Dei’ is to have meaning, the possibility that language can have meaning must be assumed. But, as noted in the General Introduction, the claim that ‘projection’ is a legitimate means in religious thinking alters the parameters of the discussion. Such parameters affect the source and nature of meaning, including the meaning of language. Sallie McFague’s work is pivotal in this respect.

This chapter explores the way in which a search for identity and meaning entails some kind of linguistic anchor and suggests an alternative anchor, offering identity for women without reliance on subjectivism. A current search for identity for women is couched in terms of ‘re-imagining’ the biblical story. McFague proposes that meaning resides in ‘myth’ as well as concept and that the two are linked. She opposes the theological tradition of ‘demythologizing’ which devalues biblical story or ‘myth’. But while opposing the loss of ‘myth’ in the tradition of ‘demythologizing’, she nevertheless agrees with the presupposition that underlies the loss of ‘myth’.¹ I agree that biblical story or ‘myth’ is important in the apprehension of meaning. I disagree with the presupposition underlying both ‘demythologizing’ and McFague’s proposed ‘remythologizing’.

¹ Sallie McFague, Models of God, p. xi. See also p. 32.
C. S. Lewis writes about the thought that underlies ‘demythologizing’:

It was put long ago by Tyrrell. As man progresses he revolts against ‘earlier and inadequate expressions of the religious idea …Taken literally and not symbolically, they do not meet his need. And as long as he demands to picture to himself distinctly the term and satisfaction of that need he is doomed to doubt, for his picturings will necessarily be drawn from the world of his present experience’.  

McFague does not question the assumption that human picturing of ‘the religious idea’ must be drawn from present experience (and apparently nothing else). What she does question is whether this dooms humanity to doubt. Given the assumptions expressed by Tyrrell, McFague looks for imaginative expression of ‘the religious idea’ in a way that will satisfy current human need. She calls this process ‘remythologizing’ and refers to the kind of theology resulting from it as ‘metaphorical theology’.

The question at this stage is what happens to symbolic or metaphorical expression if it is no longer held to refer to what it purports to refer. Both Tyrrell and McFague detach biblical language from what it appears to describe. Tyrrell writes: ‘I feel sure that the apocalyptic Heaven with its colour and music and light and happiness is a truer symbol of man’s spiritual aspirations than the cold constructions of intellectualism’. While the language used to describe ‘the apocalyptic Heaven’ cannot be taken literally, Tyrrell states that it can be taken ‘symbolically’. But for Tyrrell, ‘symbol’ refers to ‘man’s spiritual aspirations’, not to a glimpse of what heaven is like. Tyrrell intimates that this kind of ‘symbolic’ language is now less adequate to ‘man’s spiritual aspirations’ than it was in the biblical era. Nevertheless,

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it is more adequate, says Tyrrell, than ‘the cold constructions of intellectualism’. This statement may offer a precursor to McFague’s desire to ‘remythologize’ the Christian faith, i.e. to replace biblical metaphors with new ‘metaphors’, said to express ‘the salvific love of God’ in a contemporary way.\(^5\)

Lewis says that Tyrrell’s claim of inadequacy in religious expression is unlike the older via negativa in being called inadequate to ‘the religious idea’ rather than inadequate to God.\(^6\) In Tyrrell’s way of thinking biblical descriptions of the things of God are no longer inadequate to express what God is really like; they are inadequate to express a human idea of what God ought to be like. But supposing, suggests Lewis, God is able to act in and through our present world. The inadequate physical vessel may be unimaginably loaded with significance.\(^7\) Something of the sort, I suggest, is present in the biblical affirmation that human beings are created in God’s

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5 McFague, *Models of God*, p. 30. See General Introduction. Cf. a letter written by Bultmann to Barth (Marburg, 11-15 November, 1952) in (ed.) Bernd Jaspers and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Karl Barth – Rudolf Bultmann Letters 1922 – 1966* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), p. 95: ‘You rightly say that my demythologizing has its source in the insight that the mythological view of the world and man is now outdated. But should it not be clear in the course of demythologizing that the decisive point is not the fact that it is outdated but the fact that the thinking of myth (contrary to its true intention) is objectifying? I do not replace mythical thinking with the thinking of objectifying science …’ Bultmann detaches ‘mythological’ language from ‘its true intention’. Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Demythologizing and the Problem of Validity’ in (ed.) Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1963), pp. 227-242 writes that Bultmann pushes aside the pictorial language of myth in favour of ‘the existential seriousness of Christianity’. Hepburn points out that Bultmann assumes the idea of transcendence: the relation of faith to its object must be assumed rather than proved since a provable God ‘would be reduced to the status of one item among others in the furniture of the universe’. But, says Hepburn, the ‘idea of transcendence’ is also a ‘mythological’ concept. Bultmann admits this, but makes a distinction between the ‘mythological’ language of the New Testament and ‘mere’ metaphor, which means, according to Hepburn, ‘as near literal as makes no odds’. The category of ‘mere’ metaphor seems arbitrary. Hepburn goes on to say that Tillich ‘maintains that all propositions about God are symbolic except one: for without one direct proposition, the oblique language, despite its internal coherence, would have no anchor in reality… To Tillich this one direct proposition is “God is Being - itself”. Hepburn omits to say that the language of ‘Being’ for God is also symbolic: cf. Paul S. Fiddes, *Participation in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), pp.30 – 31. For further discussion of the *modus operandi* of language about God see Chapter 2 of this thesis on the doctrine of analogy.

6 C. S. Lewis, ‘Fern-seed and Elephants’, pp. 122-123.

image. And since such an affirmation presupposes the efficacy of language to convey it, I suggest that something of the sort happens with language itself.

This thesis argues against a kind of thinking that devalues the ability of language to refer to things outside or beyond itself. Although human access to God is often expressed through language drawn from present experience, this is not to assume that such language cannot refer figuratively to what is beyond present experience. This chapter considers the way terms such as ‘symbol’ and ‘metaphor’ are being redefined in the context of what is commonly called deconstructionist theory. Early instances of the deconstructionist method, demonstrated by two French nineteenth century poets, Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud, are explored below. The chapter examines the reason for the abandonment of what linguistic theorist, George Steiner calls ‘cognitive ballast’, the grounds on which it can be claimed that ‘there is something in what we say’.  

Such investigation, however brief, may seem an unwarranted digression from my topic of what it means for a woman to be created in God’s image. But if all our picturing of the ‘religious idea’ is drawn from the world of present experience, how can it be meaningfully claimed that the *imago Dei* is anything more that a tautology: human beings are in the image of their own picturing? McFague’s ‘metaphorical theology’ offers a complex approach to this dilemma but does not, in my opinion, succeed in overcoming it.

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As noted above, McFague has an idea of the ‘salvific love of God’ that she attempts to convey in contemporary metaphor. She proposes ‘an imaginative construal of the God-world relationship that is credible to us [in our time]’. At the same time she describes her ‘metaphorical theology’ as an example of the ‘via negativa’: the picturing, derived from the world of present experience, while seeming to point to a world beyond it, does not actually do so. This is to use the term ‘metaphor’ in a sense that denies its power to carry a transferred sense of meaning. Deconstructionist theory uses a similar way of thinking to deny the carrying power of any language: ‘there is nothing outside the text’ because language does not point to the world outside the world of language. Words point to other words. Steiner refers to this loss of linguistic carrying power to the world outside as ‘the break of the covenant between word and world’.

This chapter commences with some alleged aspirations of women and a mythological expression of such aspirations arising from a reinterpretation of Genesis 1:1-3. This attempt at ‘remythologizing’ moves in a deconstructionist linguistic direction. The second section considers the deconstructionist approach to language in terms of a brief Western history of linguistic philosophy. In the third section I make a suggestion about a source of cognitive ballast for language. Finally I investigate the method of McFague’s ‘metaphorical theology’ and contrast it with a method which accords with the premise of the *imago Dei* and transcendent reference of language about God.

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13 George Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 93.
A. The genesis of women and the nature of meaning

A feminist search for identity is often couched in terms of myth and metaphor. But the kind of myth and conception of metaphor entailed moves in a deconstructionist direction with a consequent restlessness in the notion of identity. Luce Irigaray writes:

[Women] want to seize that which already exists so as to bring it back to an invisible source – their source? – a place from whence they might create, create themselves *ex nihilo*? Has not history forced this impossibility upon them? They must continue to live, cut off from their beginning and from their end.14

The idea that women should create *themselves* is very different from the concept that women are created by God in the image of God. But the narrative context for the information that women are created in God’s image is, in Irigaray’s judgement, inimical to women, part of the ‘impossibility’ forced upon women that cuts them off from their alleged beginning and end.

Irigaray’s impassioned statement encapsulates perceived needs of women: a need for identity, a need for difference, a need for meaning derived from a source dedicated to women (their source). It also intimates perceived obstacles to the fulfilment of these needs: lack of a place from which to establish identity coupled with a history which has impeded establishing identity. Finally it suggests a method for rectifying these obstacles: women creating themselves *ex nihilo* from their own (invisible) source in order to reclaim their beginning and end. This search for identity begins, according to Irigaray, from ‘that which already exists’. What is already known by women about themselves can be projected towards an (invisible) source with the result that women are able to create *themselves*.

Margaret Whitford, Irigaray’s editor describes how Irigaray seeks identity for women through a proposed ‘divine dimension’ in the matriarchal line in contrast to the ‘divine dimension’ credited to the ‘man-father’ of biblical story or patriarchal genealogy. Whitford writes:

What Irigaray is concerned with is the possible alterity of ‘woman-for-herself’, instead of woman simply as the ‘other of the same’ … The central condition would be a maternal genealogy, so that the daughter could situate herself in her identity with respect to her mother. The maternal should have a spiritual and divine dimension, and not be relegated to the merely carnal, leaving the divine to the genealogy of the father.\textsuperscript{15}

Irigaray perceives a need for a specific female identity in contrast with an identity dependent on men (with women being regarded as ‘the other of the same’). It should be noted, however, that the proposed method for establishing identity for women is similar to that which is said to establish identity for men. The ‘spiritual and divine dimension’ is attributed to the matriarchal genealogy in order to place such a genealogy on an equal footing with the alleged patriarchal genealogy. In her desire to establish identity for women, independent of that bestowed by a male figure, Irigaray goes so far as to distance herself from the biblical creation story: ‘But let us say that in the beginning was the end of her story, and that from now on she will have one dictated to her: by the man-father’.\textsuperscript{16}

Catherine Keller takes this rejection of the ‘man-father’ a step further, mooting an alternative beginning to the creation story. Exploring the relationship of the creator to

\textsuperscript{15} The Irigaray Reader, p.159.

the creation, Keller writes approvingly of the supposition, considered and rejected by Augustine, that creation is like a sponge in an infinite divine sea.\footnote{Keller, \textit{Face of the Deep}, pp. 81-82. See \textit{Confessions VII, 5}, cf. \textit{VII, 1}. Keller describes this picture of a sponge in a boundless sea as Augustine’s ‘most tehomophilic trope’.} In \textit{Confessions VII, I}, Augustine describes his earlier idea of God ‘as a great being with dimensions extending everywhere … able to pass through material bodies … so that they were filled with [God’s] presence’ as ‘a false theory’. Keller, however, intimates that such a ‘divine sea’ is suggested by the \textit{tehom} of Genesis 1:2, which she depicts as a feminized locus for creation. Instead of creation being ‘dictated’ by the Word of the ‘man-father’, Keller proposes a concept of the Word and creation emerging from the formless \textit{tehom}:

Could the Word of the Creator … only unify itself over \textit{against} the feminized chaos … What if we begin instead to read the Word from the vantage point of its own fecund multiplicity, its flux into flesh, its overflow … a tehomic theology derives the incarnation from the chaoticwidth of the creation …?\footnote{Keller, \textit{Face of the Deep}, p. 19.}

Keller adopts Irigaray’s method of human attribution as the means of establishing the ‘divine presence’ (‘what if we begin instead to read the Word…?’). She suggests that the Word can be conceived as \textit{materializing} (deriving its incarnation) from the width of potential embodiment said to be implicit in primeval (feminized) chaos. She writes:

Only in relation to what we call \textit{creation} can what we call \textit{Creator} be signified, i.e. imagined to exist … In the reciprocity of influence, both arise as effects of the primal creativity. But Elohim then signifies the effect through whom all causes arise. The creativity is not a cause, not even a First Cause, but rather the condition that conditions all causal process. The creativity itself does not become, it \textit{makes becoming possible}. We imagine it therefore as the matrix of possibilities. In this tehomic matrix we are always beginning again. We decide; and we fall back on the undecidable. According to this imaginary of bottomless process, the divine decision is not made \textit{for us} but \textit{with and through us}.\footnote{Keller, \textit{Face of the Deep}, p. 181. The italics are hers. Keller quotes Alfred North Whitehead, \textit{Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology}, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald Sherburne}
In such a context meaning is process rather than content. The Word emerges; it does not determine. Keller claims to find support for ‘theologically originary indeterminacy’ in the ‘billowing multiplicity’ that she discerns in the *Confessions* of Augustine. But her concept does not allow the Word to be understood as Wisdom in Augustine’s sense.²⁰ This impinges on women’s identity in a sense I explore further in Chapter 6.

Irigaray and Keller attempt to find identity for women in the context of a re-imagined history. The search for meaning is linked with myth or re-imagined narrative. According to McFague, a key task of theology for our time is to engage with the ‘displacement of the white, Western male and the rise of those dispossessed because of gender, race or class’.²¹ In this respect, she states that ‘much deconstruction of the traditional imagery has taken place, but little construction’. What is needed, she goes on to claim, ‘is a remythologizing of the relationship between God and the world’.²² This is necessary, McFague continues, due to the inextricable and symbiotic connection of metaphor and concept in relation to theology.

Keller, it seems, is attempting to follow the process of ‘remythologizing’ in proposing the *tehom* of Genesis 1:2 as the feminized locus of creation. But whether this is an example of the inextricable and symbiotic connection of metaphor and

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²¹ See the preface of McFague, *Models of God*, pp. x-xi.
concept in relation to theology is less certain. In the past theology has claimed to have access to reality outside human construction. McFague cites the more recent belief that the worlds we inhabit are subject to human construction through language, culminating in the claim of French deconstructionist, Jacques Derrida that ‘there is nothing outside the text’. 23 According to deconstructionists, notes McFague, the Book that claims to point to the Word itself is ‘but the play of words, interpretation upon interpretation, creating a shimmering surface that has no author and no referent’. 24 In Keller’s depiction, the feminized chaos of Genesis 1:2 is a metaphor for this shimmering surface that has no author and no referent. But this is to use a metaphor for a referent that denies the possibility of a referent. While it is a metaphor in itself, Keller’s concept of ‘the face of the deep’ is at odds with the concept of the carrying power of metaphor. This begs the question of what is meant by ‘metaphor’ in relation to theology.

McFague’s remark that metaphor and concept are inextricably and symbiotically related in theology draws attention to the relationship between myth and meaning. Irigaray’s search for a history for women as a means of identity and Keller’s sketch of an alternative reading of Genesis 1: 1-3 on terms said to favour identity for women also bear witness to the deep sense of meaning that can be attained through story and link with the visible, physical world. But if the myth that purports to provide identity is the myth that denies the possibility of meaning, the possibility of a clear identity for women becomes remote.

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In Keller’s re-imagined history for women, the proposed ‘remythologizing’ of the relationship between God and the world is sketched in terms of non-relationships. There is no direct link between creator and creation. According to Keller, it is only in relation to ‘what we call creation’ that ‘what we call Creator’ can be imagined to exist. The human ‘we’ is said to offer the source of connection for whatever can be said to exist. But this emphasis on the authorship of the human ‘we’ is offset by an alleged non-relationship between human linguistic construction and what it purports to refer to: the shimmering surface divorced from author and referent. As noted earlier, this way of speaking demonstrates what Steiner calls ‘the break of the covenant between the word and world’. The alleged genesis of women is thus associated with an exodus of meaning and loss of access to external reality.

B. Myth and meaning: a Western history

C. S. Lewis describes the relation between myth and concept in terms of a broad, historical sweep:

The old, richly imaginative thought which still survives in Plato has to submit to the deathlike but indispensable process of logical analysis, nature and spirit, matter and mind, fact and myth, the literal and metaphorical have to be made more and more sharply separated, until at last a purely mathematical universe and a purely subjective mind confront one another across an unbridgeable chasm. But from this desert also, if thought is to survive, there must be a reascent and the Christian conception provides for it. Those who attain to the glorious resurrection will see the dry bones clothed again with flesh, the fact and myth remarried, the literal and metaphorical rushing together.

25 George Steiner, Real Presences, p. 93. See Section C below.
26 C. S. Lewis, Miracles (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), p.192. This is to include the promise of the new heaven and new earth within the story of humanity, a promise that this thesis takes seriously.
In spite of the eschatological character of the remarriage of the literal and metaphorical, Lewis finds some foretaste of it in myth itself. Michael J. Christensen writes:

The human predicament on the deepest level is man trying to rationally understand ... a Reality which can only be imaginatively envisioned or spiritually tasted. We experience transcendent Reality only in precious moments of mystical encounter. Reality quickly vanishes ‘when we try to grasp it with discursive reason’, as Lewis recognizes. When we attempt to translate Reality into descriptive knowledge (i.e. propositional truth) we get abstraction. ‘This is our dilemma,’ he concludes, ‘either to taste and not to know or to know and not to taste.’ ‘Of this tragic dilemma,’ Lewis says, ‘myth is the partial solution. In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as abstraction.’

The idea that myth is a vehicle for access to transcendent reality in which such reality may, albeit partially, be both tasted and known is a very different idea from the function that McFague ascribes to her kind of ‘remythologizing’. McFague writes:

Theology, at any rate my kind of theology, is principally an elaboration of a few basic metaphors and models in an attempt to express the claim of Christianity in a powerful, comprehensive and contemporary way. As remythologization, such theology acknowledges that it is, as it were, painting a picture. The picture may be full and rich but it is a picture. What this sort of enterprise makes very clear is that theology is mostly fiction: it is the elaboration of key metaphors and models. It insists that we do not know very much and that we should not camouflage our ignorance by either petrifying our metaphors or forgetting that our concepts derive from metaphors.

While Lewis emphasizes the efficacy of myth in providing access to transcendent reality, McFague stresses that theology paints a picture, not in order to provide access to transcendent reality but to make what purports to be transcendent relevant to contemporary thought. In McFague’s kind of ‘remythologizing’ metaphor and

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28 McFague, Models of God, pp. xi- xii. Cf. Tyrrell’s assertion that human picturing will necessarily be drawn from the world of present experience (see above).
concept are not inextricably and symbiotically connected in the sense assumed by Lewis. Rather the concept (what is judged to be relevant to contemporary thought) governs the ‘metaphor’. Such a method is more like that employed in allegory in which the picture stands for the concept than the symbiotic relationship between concept and metaphor that allows us to ‘taste’ or experience transcendent reality as concrete.

But even an allegorical relationship between concept and metaphor might allow access, albeit indirect, to transcendent reality, as in a parable for example. Yet McFague is at some pains to deny this possibility. She continues: ‘We must not forget the crack in the foundation beneath all our imaginings and the conceptual scheme we build upon them. That crack is exemplified by the “is not” of metaphor which denies any identity in its assertions’. It is this denial of access to transcendent reality that underlies what McFague calls ‘metaphorical theology’. A denial of link with reality is the irony that underpins Keller’s picture of primeval feminized chaos as a metaphor for the inefficacy of metaphor.

If there is a crack in the foundation beneath all our imaginings and the conceptual scheme we build on them, the re-imagined ‘relationship’ between God and the world is well and truly undermined. Nevertheless, McFague expresses a sort of nostalgia for the kind of linguistic sacramentalism that was understood to link the visible and

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29 See, however, M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), pp. 2-3: ‘A parable … enforces a moral or other kind of doctrine, but not, like allegory, by the actions of abstract personifications. Instead, a parable is a short narrative, presented so as to bring out the analogy, or parallel, between its elements and a lesson that the speaker is trying to bring home to us’. See also my discussion on allegory in Chapter 2.

transcendent worlds in the Western world until the sixteenth century. In her own way McFague wishes to revive it. She writes:

Michel Foucault has written a fascinating study of the decline of the complex system of ‘resemblances’ or ‘signs’ between the visible and invisible worlds which until the sixteenth century served as a kind of linguistic sacramentalism, linking all dimensions of reality… [T]he assumption was that there was an original Text that all the signs pointed to and interpreted, albeit mostly in an oblique fashion. This linguistic ‘sacramentalism’ ended with the loss of faith in an original Text that all the signs pointed to, and one is left with ‘mere’ words that refer to nothing outside themselves.31

McFague states that previous faith in ‘an original Text’ supplied a ‘metaphysics of presence’ that gave a sense of cogency to linguistic meaning. According to deconstruction, continues McFague, ‘Western theology claims also to have assurance of this Presence in the Book, the Text of texts, in which human words truly refer to the Word itself.’32 Such a statement might give the impression that the historical loss of faith in linguistic presence arose from a historical loss of faith in Christianity. Historically, faith in ‘an original Text’ has given way, in some quarters, to a belief that words refer to nothing outside themselves. But the Text to which the previous sacramentalism referred was not the biblical text. McFague states elsewhere that the so-called original Text was the medieval ‘book of nature’.33

The medieval background for linguistic sacramentalism was a popularised cosmological model of reality. It would be more accurate to describe the model as pre-modern rather than specifically medieval, since it had begun to develop in late antiquity. C. S. Lewis writes:

In the last age of antiquity many writers ...were, perhaps half-consciously, gathering together and harmonising views of very different origin: building a syncretistic model, not only out of Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoical, but out of Pagan and Christian elements. This Model the Middle Ages adopted and perfected.\textsuperscript{34}

According to this older view, as E. L. Mascall describes it, the external world is to be perceived in a trans-sensory sense, offering access to a transcendent ‘intelligible object of which it is the manifestation’. But, notes Mascall, the visible world has become detached from such a transcendent meaning. For Kant, for instance, perception of externals is reduced to sensation requiring ‘categories of understanding’ in order to be perceived.\textsuperscript{35} While the older method of receiving meaning no longer operates in the Kantian scheme of things, the consequence is not the abolition of a source of meaning, at least not immediately. Rather the source of meaning operates through the human ‘categories of understanding’.

Abandoning the linguistic sacramentalism of pre-modern cosmology did not entail immediate loss of conceptual meaning. But concept is not the whole story, as McFague points out. Despite the loss of belief in an invisible source of meaning in the pre-modern sense, a new source of invisible meaning has historically come to the fore. Carl Jung writes:

Significantly enough, it is Kant’s doctrine of categories, more than anything else, that destroys in embryo every attempt to revive metaphysics in the old sense of the word but at the same time paves the way for a rebirth of the Platonic spirit.\textsuperscript{36}


The pre-modern model assimilated and adapted Plato’s notion of an invisible world of forms, ideas or archetypes. Jung argues that something like this invisible world has since become part of the inner world. Archetypes still exist in the subconscious mind:

[T]here are present in every psyche forms which are unconscious but nonetheless active – living dispositions, ideas in the Platonic sense that perform and continually influence our thoughts and feelings and actions.\(^{37}\)

In sum, two linguistic tendencies appear to have operated in recent Western history. Firstly, there is a shift of focus: attention has moved from the external world providing access to a transcendent world to the conceptual world providing access to the external world. More recently deconstructionist theory has cast doubt on conceptual access to the external world. But secondly the old sacramental view has given way to a new source of meaning in the world of the subconscious. Jung terms this the rebirth of the Platonic spirit. A search for this kind of meaning appears to be linked with deconstructionist theory.

Steiner detects early evidence of deconstructionist thinking in two nineteenth century French poets: Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud.\(^{38}\) Mallarmé is considered in the next section. Rimbaud is known for the saying, ‘Je est un autre’. Steiner writes: ‘Rimbaud posits at the now vacant heart of consciousness the splintered images of other and momentary “selves”.’\(^{39}\) Rimbaud’s editor, Douglas Parmée, gives context to this statement: Rimbaud’s theory of the ‘voyant’ comes from ‘two disjointed and rhapsodic letters … written to two friends in May 1871’:

\textit{On a tort de dire; je pense. On devrait dire; on me pense. Car Je est un autre}. As soon as one examines oneself closely, one realises that one’s personality contains depths of which one is normally unaware … our thoughts

\(^{37}\) Jung, \textit{Aspects of the Feminine}, p.122.
\(^{38}\) Steiner, \textit{Real Presences}, p. 94.
\(^{39}\) Steiner, \textit{Real Presences}, p. 99.
which we take to be our own, spring from something within us which we cannot control because we do not know what it is.  

Parmée goes on to comment that ‘colours, scents, shapes that occur to [Rimbaud] in his exploration of these depths…seem very similar to the unconscious of psychologists’.  

There is reason to suppose that the rebirth of the Platonic spirit as a source of meaning has a certain appeal for some feminist writers. In *Super, Natural Christians*, McFague recommends the Platonic medieval cosmology as a case study for her proposed ecologically interdependent cosmology. Elizabeth A. Johnson appears to share something of Jung’s discernment of a psychological metaphysic. She states that ‘symbols for divine mystery cannot be produced intentionally but grow from a deep level that Tillich identifies as the collective unconscious’. Such symbols, she maintains, can be generated by ‘women’s religious experience’ understood as ‘an awakening from the deep abyss of human existence in real encounter with divine being’.  

C. S. Lewis notes ‘that great movement of internalisation, and that consequent aggrandisement of man and desiccation of the outer universe, in which the psychological history of the West has so largely consisted’. Jung claims that something of the old invisible metaphysical world has been transferred to the inner world of the subconscious mind. Despite McFague’s disclaimer about the ability of

43 Johnson, *SHE WHO IS*, p. 47.  
44 Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, p. 42. Lewis obviously means the term ‘man’ to include women.
‘metaphorical theology’ to reach transcendent reality, it would seem that her appeal to ‘remythologize’ is an appeal for a kind of meaning. But what kind of meaning is it and how does this affect women, one might ask. Irigaray states that women want to seize that which already exists so as to bring it back to an invisible source for the purpose of creating themselves. The invisible source which allows for self-creation may well be the subconscious mind.

C. Language that means something

Steiner claims that ‘the motif of semantic inadequacy is an ancient one’.45 Yet the admission of imperfect linguistic access to the world was, from ancient times, accompanied by a belief in the meaning of meaning, giving credence to the idea that ‘there is something in what we say’. As noted above, loss of faith in a sense of ‘presence’ in language supplied by the medieval model broadly coincided with a change of belief about the kind of access we humans have to the external world. But the effect on the understanding of language was not immediate. Steiner dates ‘the break of the covenant between word and world’ from a movement among French poets in the nineteenth century. According to Steiner the effect was to ‘splinter the foundations of the Hebraic-Hellenic-Cartesian edifice in which the ratio and psychology of the Western communicative tradition had lodged’.46

Steiner describes the ‘disjunction of language from external reference’ in the poetic writings of French poet, Stéphane Mallarmé. According to Mallarmé, ‘to ascribe to words a correspondence to “things out there”, to see and use them as somehow

45 Steiner, Real Presences, p. 95.
46 Steiner, Real Presences, p. 92 ff.
representational of “reality” in the world, is not only a vulgar illusion. It makes of language a lie:

To use the word *rose* as if it was, in any way, like what we conceive to be some botanical phenomenon, to ask of any word that it stand in lieu of, as a surrogate for, the perfectly inaccessible ‘truths’ of substance, is to abuse and demean it. It is to encrust language with falsehood.\(^{47}\)

Steiner comments that Mallarmé’s preferred epithet for this attitude to language is ‘impure’. He goes on to describe how Mallarmé conceives the lack of connection between word and world:

That which endows the word *rose*, that arbitrary assemblage to two vowels and two consonants, with its sole legitimacy and life force is, states Mallarmé, “l’absence de toute rose”.\(^{48}\)

Steiner describes this kind of approach as the ‘linguistics of “real absence”’. The movement of which Mallarmé was a part had a momentous effect on the understanding of the role of language and human access to reality. According to Mallarmé:

Only when we realize that what words refer to are other words …can we return to a true freedom. It is within the language system alone that we possess liberties of construction and deconstruction, of remembrance and futurity, so boundless, so dynamic, so proper to the evident uniqueness of human thought and imagining that, in comparison, external reality, whatever that might or might not be, is little more than brute intractability and deprivation.\(^{49}\)

In Mallarmé’s approach, the break of the covenant between word and world is accompanied by a negative view of external reality along with indifference to whether or not the world of language corresponds to reality. Steiner goes on to observe that, for Mallarmé, ‘the self-referential, self-regulating and transformative cosmos of discourse is neither like the world, nor unlike it (how would we know?’).

\(^{47}\) Steiner, *Real Presences*, pp. 95-96.

\(^{48}\) Steiner, *Real Presences*, pp. 95.

\(^{49}\) Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 97.
Steiner describes this disjunction between word and world as the breakpoint of the *Logos*-order, leading to the replacement of ‘a central supposition of “real presence”’ by one of “real absence”. It is clear, however, that Steiner is not claiming that the previous *Logos*-order was necessarily a biblical one. He writes:

> Western theology and the metaphysics, epistemology and aesthetics which have been its major footnotes, are ‘logocentric’. This is to say they axiomatize as fundamental and pre-eminent the concept of a ‘presence’. It can be that of God (ultimately, it *must* be); of Platonic ‘Ideas’; of Aristotelian and Thomist essence. It can be that of a Cartesian self-consciousness; of Kant’s transcendent logic or of Heidegger’s ‘Being’. It is to these pivots that the spokes of meaning finally lead. They ensure its plenitude. That presence, theological, ontological or metaphysical, makes credible the assertion that there ‘is something in what we say’.  

But if the historical *Logos*-order is not necessarily biblical, it is, at least ultimately, theist. The pivot to which the spokes of meaning finally lead is ultimately God. According to Steiner, Derrida concedes the point. ‘Derrida’s formulation is beautifully incisive: “the intelligible face of the sign remains turned to the word and the face of God”’. Steiner goes on to remark:

> A semantics, a poetics of correspondence, of decipherability and truth-values arrived at across time and consensus, are strictly inseparable from the postulate of theological-metaphysical transcendence. Thus the origin of the axiom of meaning and of the God-concept is a shared one.  

For deconstructionists, however, the sign is no longer ‘intelligible’ in the old sense and God is no longer the pivot to which the spokes of meaning lead.

Sallie McFague claims to distance herself from full acceptance of the deconstructionist position. In her presentation, the ‘is not’ of metaphor that denies

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50 Steiner, *Real Presences*, p.121.
51 Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 119.
any identity in its assertions is said to be accompanied by the ‘is’ of metaphor.\textsuperscript{52} Such a description of the efficacy of metaphor might seem to indicate that the success of metaphor in offering access to its referent equals its failure to do so. But, despite this apparent even-handedness, McFague does not hold the position that the ‘is’ of metaphor functions with much success. Regarding her ‘metaphorical’ understanding of connection between the vehicle and tenor she writes: ‘things are and are not similar, with the emphasis on the latter’.\textsuperscript{53}

This is how McFague describes her understanding of the ‘relationship’ between human constructions and reality:

There is indeed no way behind our constructions to test them for their correspondence with the reality they presume to represent, but the constructions do, I believe, have a twofold relationship with reality which deconstruction ignores. First, they are productive of reality … In this sense we create the reality in which we live; we do not copy it, or to put it more pointedly, there are no copies, only creations. The assumption here, however, is that there is a reality to which our constructions refer, even though the only way we have of reaching it is by creating versions of it. This is altogether different from the deconstructionist’s position that there is nothing to which the text refers.

Second our constructions are intended to be better than the ones they refute or replace. This of course a very difficult issue, because if one admits that all are readings, with the new replacing the old, on what basis can some be better than others? They certainly cannot claim to be better absolutely, or from all perspectives, or for all time. At the most they might be better relatively (to other constructions) from a particular perspective, and for a particular time.\textsuperscript{54}

McFague’s plea for a ‘remythologizing’ of the relationship between God and the world is premised on what she terms the inextricable and symbiotic connection of metaphor and concept in relation to theology. But, despite the term ‘theology’, God

has nothing to do with the way language works in McFague’s depiction of it. God does not ensure its plenitude. The spokes of meaning do not lead, even indirectly, to God but rather to humanity. The only way we have of reaching reality, according to McFague, is by creating versions of it and the resulting constructions are verified from a particular (human) perspective.

McFague does not accept a covenant between word and world with the spokes of meaning pointing to God. For McFague (as for Mallarmé) reality is not accessible (or if it is we cannot prove it). The function of human constructions is not to reach reality but to transform or create reality. The old idea of access to truth-values across time gives way to relativised truth governed by a particular perspective. But her relativised truth still claims some kind of cogency. Given that the cogency comes from humanity, it might be asked whether McFague differs from a deconstructionist denial of correspondence from the word to the world only in the vehemence of her insistence on subjectivist meaning.

Where does theology sit with a human metaphysic of ‘presence’? If theology and old linguistic assumptions go together, what happens if the old linguistic assumptions are abandoned? Steiner reports that, according to Derrida, the ‘age of the sign is essentially theological’. The age that abandons ‘the sign’ in the old sense cannot retain ‘theology’ in the old sense. McFague makes clear that it is not the reality of the living God to which her kind of theology claims to point. But it does claim to point to something: a human picture of God. She writes that her models of God are ‘not

55 Steiner, Real Presences, p.120.
arbitrary, because they are the deepest...expressions of love known to us, rather than because they are necessarily descriptive of the nature of God'.

Has it come to this? If the old Platonic metaphysic of ‘presence’ is untenable, is an anthropocentric metaphysic of ‘presence’, with God modelled on (rather than described through) the deepest expression of human nature, the only alternative to radical deconstruction? As presented by McFague, the deconstructionist argument against the old metaphysic of ‘presence’ intimates that it was based on the biblical text but, historically, this is not the case. Arguments that have prevailed against the pre-modern cosmological model are not arguments against a Judaeo-Christian metaphysic of ‘presence’.

Rowan Williams makes the intriguing comment that Augustine ‘is most philosophically interesting when not being self-consciously philosophical’. Augustine, says Williams, moves beyond a Platonic system of representation when talking about language:

Augustine is...obliged by his commitment to the incarnate Christ to *deny* that the incorruptible can ever as such be an object for the cognition of material, historical and ‘desirous’ beings. Only in the non-finality of historical relationships...and in the consequent restlessness...is unchanging truth to be touched...

There is some hint of deconstruction in this. Williams continues:

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58 Rowan Williams, ‘Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s De Doctrina’, pp. 145 – 146. I am unsure how this accords with the masculine principle which is able to contemplate God (see Chapter 2).
[I]t is possible to see Augustine’s treatment of reality and representation as moving in [the] direction [of]…the popular notion that everything is language, everything is interpretation…

This, however, is not the full sum of Augustine’s treatment. Williams goes on to note:

But the point at which this ceases to be an adequate characterization of Augustine is…the canonical text that witnesses to the canonical (normative) representation, Christ. . .’

In Foucault’s outline of medieval linguistic sacramentalism the signs are said to refer to ‘an original Text’.59 But in Augustine’s treatment of reality and representation, the text is said to refer to the sign, the normative representation, Christ.

Christ as normative representation is canonically the sign of the Father (John 14:8-11) but this representation is more than a resemblance, in a Platonic sense, between the visible and transcendent worlds. The Word that becomes flesh is also a solid bridge between the transcendent and visible worlds: God and humanity are, it could be said, inextricably and symbiotically linked. But, even before the Word becomes flesh, there is a solid covenant between word and world: this Word is the One through whom the world was made.

Over against this metaphysic of ‘presence’ stands Irigaray’s and Keller’s objection that, in Genesis 1:3, the Word is dictated to feminised chaos ‘by the man-father’.

Irigaray and Keller oppose the canonical Word on feminist grounds. Neither appears to consider the biblical tradition that the Word was with the Father before the world was made and that, prior to the Incarnation, the Word is depicted as the feminine Wisdom (Proverbs 8).60

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60 Cf. Chapter 3, Section B.
D. Loaded with significance

Thus far I have considered the relationship of language to external reality in terms of the narrative or model that supports and gives cogency to the notion of such relationship. Feminist objections to the Judaeo-Christian grand narrative have resulted in a movement towards a deconstructionist approach to language, alongside a proviso that meaning can be asserted from a human perspective. This kind of feminist thinking is consistent with the notion that women create themselves. But it is antithetical to the notion that women are created in the image of God.

To illustrate the point let us consider the *imago Dei* as a touchstone of the link between the word and external (in this case transcendent) reality. If, as McFague avers, the construction ‘*imago Dei*’ produces rather than reflects reality then the *imago Dei* can only be understood to operate within the construction. For this to work the construction will have to include both the image and God but this will not be the transcendent living God but only a humanly constructed version of God. Even humanity, it may be added, will only be a humanly constructed version of humanity. But the source of meaning that gives cogency to the construction is not God but a human conception of ‘the religious idea’. All this is a reversal of the linguistic assumptions behind Genesis 1. It is important to be clear about this because language based on a deconstructionist assumption sometimes sounds as if it still retained the old linguistic assumption of access to external reality. This is misleading.
Borrowing the concept from Steiner, I distinguish between what I call covenantal and non-covenantal linguistics. A covenant necessarily has two (or more) parties to it. According to Steiner, there was, prior to the nineteenth century, a covenant between human words and the world allowing for language to have symbolic reference to what is outside it. There was also an external metaphysic of ‘presence’ that allows for signification: what might be called sacramental meaning. McFague, insofar as I understand her, denies an external metaphysic of ‘presence’ and casts considerable doubt on the covenant between word and world. According to the theory she expresses, her linguistic sphere of operation appears to have only one party to it. For that reason I would describe her presentation of the modus operandi of language in general and religious language in particular as non-relational or non-covenantal.

One of the arguments against non-covenantal language is that it is unsustainable. Pragmatically, covenantal language operation persists, as Steiner points out: the plea for non-covenantal linguistics is itself couched in the context of the older assumptions.\(^6^1\) Secondly, as indicated above, the abandonment of the pre-modern cosmological model does not necessitate the abandonment of an external metaphysic of ‘presence’. There is a gap of three centuries between the abandonment of ‘linguistic sacramentalism’ as reported by Foucault and ‘the break in the covenant between world and world’ as reported by Steiner. But if the metaphysic of ‘presence’ supplied by the pre-modern cosmological model is no longer tenable, a replacement is necessary. This leads to the third point. On the face of it, the plea to ‘remythologize’ entails the old idea of metaphorical reference and cogency in what is said. In this regard, McFague’s ‘metaphorical theology’ needs to be considered with care.

\(^6^1\) Steiner, Real Presences, p.120; p. 129.
As observed above, the contention that human constructions create rather than reflect reality means that the *imago Dei* can only operate within the human construction. McFague’s understanding of metaphor in ‘metaphorical theology’ is governed by her assumption of non-access to reality and a provisional human-centred metaphysic of ‘presence’. McFague states: ‘The essence of metaphorical theology … is precisely the refusal to identify human constructions with divine reality.’

McFague uses ‘metaphorical’ in a particular sense when she asserts that ‘[m]uch if not all religious language and a great deal of theological language …literally appropriate to personal, social and political human relationships is applied metaphorically to God’. According to McFague, ‘fundamentalism’ does not accept the ‘metaphorical character of religious and theological language’. This is because ‘fundamentalism’ assumes the old referential efficacy of metaphorical language rather than a redefined ‘metaphorical’ character of religious and theological language. What then does McFague mean by ‘metaphorical theology’?

In non-covenantal linguistics the authority for a religious metaphor is human ideology (what is judged relevant to contemporary thought). McFague argues this in relation to theology, readily admitting that such ideology is relativist. But ‘fundamentalism’ fails to agree that biblical language is relativist in this sense. For McFague, it is the ‘identification of the Word of God with …human words in the canonical Scriptures of the church’ which provides evidence that ‘fundamentalism’

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fails to accept the metaphorical character of religious and theological language.\(^{65}\) For McFague, ‘metaphor’ is commensurate with ‘provisional’. The ‘is not’, as seen above, is predominant.

Nevertheless, for McFague, ‘metaphor’ in theological language is as important as concept, being inextricably and symbiotically linked with it. A metaphor has a literal and transferred meaning, a vehicle and a tenor as it is often called.\(^{66}\) Yet it is the essence of McFague’s ‘metaphorical theology’ that the literal vehicle, the language about personal, social and political human relationships, cannot refer to divine reality. What then do McFague’s vehicles refer to? As I understand her, she argues that the literal vehicle is a projection of a possibility. It paints a picture, albeit mostly a fictional picture. In this sense, theological metaphors are projections of a possibility of a divine reality.\(^{67}\) To my mind her description of metaphor is a good deal more like allegory. I will consider this point more fully in the next chapter.

McFague’s kind of metaphor or model (defined as a ‘metaphor with staying power’)\(^{68}\) is understood to project a possibility of divine reality. Her concept of ‘sacramentalism’ is described in terms of ‘the model’:

> The model of God the creator as mother suggests an ontological (or cosmological) sacramentalism: the world is born from the being of God and hence will be like God. The model of God the saviour as lover suggests a personal (or anthropological) sacramentalism: the world is in a responsive relationship to God as his Beloved and hence will, in different ways, manifest that relationship. The first kind of sacramentalism, the sacramentalism of creation, is the more basic, for it implies that all phenomena in reality have potential for reflecting deity. The second kind of sacramentalism is more

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\(^{68}\) McFague, *Models of God*, p. 34.
selective, for it suggests that human beings as the *imago dei*, those with the greatest potential for responding as beloved to lover, can be revelatory of the God-world relationship in a special way.\(^69\)

If McFague had not already denied to her metaphors and models the ability to refer to divine reality it might appear that her form of sacramentalism actually does refer to divine reality. How could all phenomena have the potential to reflect deity if they cannot point to divine reality? How could humanity (as the *imago dei*) be revelatory of the God-world relationship in a special way? The answer, I believe, is in the word ‘suggests’. The model projects a possibility. Within the projected possibility there is a suggested sacramentalism. Within the model, the projected version of the world, for instance, can be understood to have the potential to reflect the projected version of the deity. The old idea of vehicle and tenor operates *within the model*, but not outside it. The old idea of metaphorical reference is not abandoned; rather it is reissued within a subjectivist framework. The subjectivist framework supplies the metaphysic of ‘presence’. On such terms McFague’s ‘metaphorical theology’ is profoundly anthropocentric.

I am unsure whether McFague would class Lewis as a ‘fundamentalist’ (a charge he would have denied)\(^70\) but it is certain that Lewis identifies the canonical Scriptures as the Word of God, albeit in an earthen vessel.\(^71\) Lewis also writes about sacramentalism but his use of the term is different to McFague’s, as will be explored in Chapter 3. He would agree with McFague that human language is often

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\(^{70}\) Lewis, ‘Fern-seed and Elephants’, p. 204.

metaphorical and that religious language is no exception to this. He would disagree about the efficacy and validity of such language. Metaphor, says Lewis, has to be met half way, whether the metaphor is religious or poetic. For instance, it is ‘no good holding a dialectical pistol to the poet’s head and demanding how the deuce … a woman [could be] a red rose.’ To which it could be added that it is no good holding a dialectical pistol to the head of language and demanding how the deuce the word ‘rose’ could refer to a botanical phenomenon.

What I call relational or covenantal linguistics is different from that outlined in McFague’s ‘metaphorical’ theology. According to Lewis, ‘demythology’ finds the story of the Ascension inadequate to the ‘religious idea’ because it is expressed in terms of physical space. To the argument that the spiritual reality can have nothing to do with space Lewis poses the counter-question, ‘Who told you this? … When I know as I am known I shall be able to tell … how the transcendent reality either excludes and repels locality or how unimaginably it assimilates and loads it with significance.’ In a similar way, while religious metaphor, based on personal, social and political human relationships, is undeniably inadequate in expressing spiritual reality does that mean it cannot be unimaginably assimilated and loaded with sacramental significance?

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74 Lewis, ‘Fern-seed and Elephants’, p. 207.
**Conclusion**

The feminist assumption that the biblical writings are ‘patriarchal’ in authorship and bias opens the door to a subjectivist approach to truth. Many feminist writers premise their argument from an assumption that women are made in God’s image (with the difficulty that if truth is anthropomorphic the opposite is true with God in the image of women). But Catherine Keller does not simply begin from the *imago Dei* but with a more detailed redrafting of Genesis 1.

George Steiner writes about the need for ‘cognitive ballast’ to underpin meaning so that ‘there is something in what we say’. But, with metaphor or ‘myth’, ballast is more than cognitive in the sense that meaning is tasted as well as known. In this regard, McFague writes about the need to ‘remythologize’ rather than ‘demythologize’, and this is what I think Keller tries to carry out. But while I agree with McFague that myth is essential to meaning, a subjectivist ‘remythologizing’ is on a very different footing from acceptance of revealed truth.

McFague’s contention that metaphor and concept are inextricably and symbiotically linked in relation to theology can be taken in more than one way. C. S. Lewis would agree with the contention but not with McFague’s linguistic interpretation of it. Lewis would argue that myth and concept work together to allow transcendent reality to be tasted as well as known. By contrast, McFague’s linguistic access to what purports to be transcendent is limited to human picturing based on present experience. For McFague, theological ‘metaphor’ lacks symbolic reference: the vehicle of present experience does not carry a tenor that would allow any crossing of a transcendent threshold.
But while denying the possibility of knowing and tasting transcendent reality, McFague recommends knowing and tasting something. Given that theology is limited to human picturing based on present experience, McFague’s attempt to ‘remythologize’ theology appears to operate in a strangely self-contained way. The humanly conceived picture contains both vehicle and tenor. There is, it could be said, nothing outside the picture. Understood in this way, ‘remythologizing’ does not claim to go beyond demythologized myth in Tyrrell’s sense.

Catherine Keller takes ‘remythologizing’ a step further. Her re-imagining of the tehom of Genesis 1:2 as a matrix of possibilities is not based on present experience but rather on an alleged feminist history arising from deconstruction of the biblical Word. ‘Theologically originary indeterminacy’ is presented in opposition to the Word that ‘dictates’. For Keller, the creator does not create and the Word does not determine in the old sense; the matrix of possibilities replaces the old linguistic assumption of author and referent. (A search for identity for women in such a context is considered in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis.)

In the pre-modern cosmological model the visible world was understood to reflect an invisible transcendent world. As noted above, pre-modern cosmology was syncretistic in origin. But the biblical concept of the imago Dei also presents an aspect of the present world reflecting an aspect of a higher reality. The visible vehicle of humanity as male and female is presented as the ‘myth’ that allows for the tasting of transcendence. Such a ‘myth’ of correspondence between the visible and transcendent worlds cannot be established without a prior linguistic covenant.
between word and world in which the spokes of meaning point to God. God is said to inaugurate naming of things before humanity does so. The ‘myth’ is presented on premises that are profoundly relational.

This thesis argues that human interpersonal relationships are precisely the literal vehicle behind the biblical concept of the *imago Dei*. The next chapter presents a suggestion by Edmund Hill, Augustine’s translator that the *imago Dei* is based on male and female interpersonal relationships mirroring Trinitarian interpersonal relationships. Hill offers this suggestion as a correction to Augustine’s use of allegory in explicating how women can be regarded as the *imago Dei*. But Augustine is not the only theologian to resort to allegory in relation to the *imago Dei*. The next chapter compares Augustine’s proposal with that of a contemporary feminist writer, Elizabeth A. Johnson.

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See Genesis 1:5; 8.