Chapter 5

Women and the source of identity

Introduction

The first four chapters of this thesis have considered the *imago Dei* and language about the *imago Dei* in terms of *symbolic reference* to the Trinitarian Godhead. The thesis has compared what I call covenantal and non-covenantal linguistics and has concluded that covenantal linguistics (the assumption that language has the power to refer to reality) is a prerequisite for the *imago Dei*. This is not to say that language is more than an earthen vessel in terms of its power to refer to anything, particularly in relation to transcendent reality. That is why some external guarantor is necessary to provide what Steiner calls ‘cognitive ballast’ allowing there to be something in what we say. I argue that ‘cognitive ballast’ could be better described as ‘meta-cognitive’ ballast, since apprehension of transcendent reality is not merely a cognitive activity. Chapter 1 suggested that the *Word* though whom the *world* was made may supply a linguistic anchor as the One who links word and external reality.

Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis assumed linguistic access, not only to the reality of the world of here and now but also to transcendent reality. Those chapters explored what I term the ‘myth’ of the *imago Dei*, not in a fictional sense, but in the sense of its narrative context in the biblical writings. The exploration revealed complex interpersonal relationships described in gendered terms at the human, divine and divine-human levels of existence. This understanding depends on acknowledging the role of Word-Wisdom in the Godhead who becomes incarnate as a human male. The
link between transcendence and physical reality is consequently a key player in women’s identity.

This chapter turns to epistemological questions associated with a search for women’s identity. The following chapters continue the appraisal of how assumptions about epistemology affect thinking about women’s identity in general and in the churches in particular. As noted in Chapter 2, Rosemary Ruether states that a feminist ‘ideological critique of the image of God idea in Scripture and Christian tradition changes fundamentally the nature of the discussion’. Such a change does not only affect the cognitive nature of the discussion. Whether symbolic reference to the things of God is (or is not) admitted has a more subtle affect on the flavour of the discussion.

Non-covenantal linguistics questions the power of language to refer to reality, denying in extreme form the power of the term ‘rose’, for example, to refer to the botanical phenomenon. One difficulty with non-covenantal linguistics is that even such a negative assertion relies on the contrary assumption of linguistic efficacy. Nevertheless, Sallie McFague appears to posit a type of non-covenantal linguistics in relation to what she discerns as a key theological task of redressing injustice towards marginalised groups, including women. According to McFague, theological language does not refer to transcendent reality. In spite of this, she believes such language should be ‘remythologized’. This is what I call an attempt to ‘put the rose back’ within the linguistic construct or model. While such ‘remythologizing’ may appear to recapture the kind of ‘tasting’ associated with traditional use of metaphor for the

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things of God, the change of flavour affects identity for women, especially in church leadership as will be explored in Chapters 7 and 8.

A denial of linguistic cogency is closely associated with a more generalized loss of meaning including the significance of personal identity. McFague proposes a sense of identity within what she terms an ‘ecological model of self and world’. The result appears to be two sources of identity: a constructing identity of the model-maker and a constructed identity within the model. This chapter contrasts a method of constructing identity with identity for women received from, and patterned on, the Wisdom of God as interactive other. The next chapter contrasts a search for a redemptive identity within a humanly constructed cosmological model, with the kind of identity promised to the redeemed cosmos through the redemption of humanity.

Given the nature of feminist proposals, it is necessary to engage with philosophical presuppositions behind the proposals. This chapter begins with a feminist dilemma regarding the philosophical roots of the feminist movement, confronted with the very different assumptions of a postmodern world. It compares the deconstructionist assumptions expressed by nineteenth century French poet, Arthur Rimbaud with McFague’s proposal for a sense of self within a ‘subject-subjects model’ and considers the effect of her model on identity and soteriology. The third section continues the evaluation, commenced in Chapter 1 of this thesis, of Catherine Keller’s attempt to supply mythological content to the notion that women want to create themselves. The project is compared and contrasted with what Keller herself identifies as the inverse of it: Karl Barth’s presentation of the relation between the Word and the world.
The chapter goes on to assess McFague’s attempt to construct a cosmology ‘that “makes sense” in terms of an incarnational understanding of Christianity and an organic interpretation of postmodern science’. While a coherent world-view is a prior condition for my topic of women’s identity, McFague’s method is not, to my mind, conducive to it. The chapter considers some developments in thinking since the Enlightenment that appear to have led to a postmodern impasse affecting women in particular, before concluding with an alternative philosophical basis for the *imago Dei*, following the contention of this thesis that women’s symbolic identity receives its cogency through Word-Wisdom through whom the world was made.

A. A frame of self-reference?

Irigaray’s editor, Margaret Whitford, sums up a predicament for postmodern feminists:

> On the one hand, they share with postmodernist thought the radical critique of the modernist Enlightenment inheritance; on the other hand, the emancipatory thrust of feminism is rooted in the Enlightenment.

According to Whitford, women are caught between a postmodern deconstruction of the subject and an unresolved search for a sense of their own worth and meaning.

Whitford continues:

> Irigaray’s contribution here is to point to the dangers for women of embracing postmodernism too hastily or too uncritically …She warns against displacing the male/female binary before the female side has acceded to identity and subjectivity…

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For feminism the critique of the Enlightenment inheritance is not so much a critique of subjectivity as a demand for subjectivity and identity for women.

As noted in Chapter 1 of this thesis, the postmodern era casts doubt on access to external reality. This lack of access undermines the sense of meaning previously attributed to human discourse about the external world. Regarding deconstructionist thinker Jacques Derrida, Elaine Graham writes:

Derrida’s profound scepticism toward views of meaning as fixed and absolute enables all discourse to be exposed as provisional, and appeals to ‘truth’ and ‘consensus’ as illusory.¹

Scepticism about meaning behind discourse affects meaning previously associated with women’s identity. Concerning Derrida’s attitude to the ‘male/female binary’, Graham continues:

Binary oppositions, especially those which characterize masculine and feminine as fixed, self-authenticating ‘metaphysical presences’ are undermined as unstable slippery concepts which deny any notion of language as revealing a reliable external reality.

If meaning is no longer in any sense fixed, identity also becomes provisional and illusory. But the need for identity is not abandoned. Failing a source of meaning via the conscious subject, authentication is said to come from the outside in some less direct way. James K. A. Smith writes about Derrida:

In the place of a metaphysics of presence is a quasi-ontology of the trace (or presence-in-absence), and instead of an isolated, self-conscious subject fully present to itself in the interiority of a pure consciousness, Derrida sketches a subject who is constituted by a relation to an exteriority – the alterity of the Other in the communal networks of signification.²

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One difficulty with this kind of thinking is its prior emphasis on lack of access to the outside. According to Stéphane Mallarmé, words can only refer to other words. On this assumption, a search for authentication from relation to an exteriority or source outside the subject becomes problematic. In this regard, McFague postulates an ‘exteriority’ that is not, strictly speaking, outside the subject. What she refers to as a ‘sense of self’ appears to operate at a pre-cognitive level which she builds into a constructed model of the external world. Her somewhat complex proposal is considered below.

The idea of relation to an ‘exteriority’ as a source of identity is in a sense anticipated by Mallarmé’s contemporary, Arthur Rimbaud. As noted in chapter 1, the context for Rimbaud’s statement, ‘Je est un autre’ comes from letters to friends in May 1871. Rimbaud writes that one is wrong to say ‘I think’. One ought to say I am thought. For ‘I’ is an ‘other’. The real identity comes, apparently, from the outside: it is the ‘other’ that constitutes the ‘I’. But the ‘other’ is not apprehended directly from the external world. Rather it is mediated through the inner life of the poet. Douglas Parmée describes how Rimbaud attempts to get in touch with his inner life by a course of experiments with drugs, alcohol and ‘every possible exploitation and mortification of the senses of smell and touch and hearing’.

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9 ‘Introduction’ to *Twelve French Poets*, p. liv.
In this regard, George Steiner remarks:

Rimbaud posits at the now vacant heart of consciousness the splintered images of other and momentary ‘selves’. And he does so in ways and in contexts which render almost inescapable the intuition that those other selves are not some neutral or parallel alterity, but parodistic, nihilistic anti-matter, radically subversive of order and creation.  

Rimbaud would have agreed that these contacts with the other selves had an infernal character, since he himself recounted his experiences in Une Saison en Enfer. But Steiner omits the motive for the experiments. Parmée writes:

Rimbaud’s purpose is not only artistic but moral: if and when we can recognise and understand all the hitherto unknown and neglected aspects of humanity, if we can come to terms with reality in all its complexity, if we can accept all the monstrous discoveries of the poet as something natural, then the poet will have become a multiplicateur de progrès. Mind and body will achieve a harmony unknown since the Greeks, for despite the apparently subjective nature of his experiences, Rimbaud believed that the poet is a more privileged and richer personality than normal people, so that in spite of the individual nature of his methods, he will be discovering truths of universal validity … Rimbaud is always conscious of his social responsibility and of his duty to communicate his findings to others.

Rimbaud’s method is, apparently, subjective and individualist. Yet it stems from what Steiner calls ‘the vacant heart of consciousness’. The gateway to the new vision of the poet is not conscious subjectivity but ‘the non-rational, sensorial aspect of the poet’s imagination’. It is the poet’s duty to convey this radically new vision to the world:

This supreme revolt, not only against the organisation of society but against any normal conception of life, is being undertaken not as a mere destruction but as a destruction that will lead to a new and better conception of mankind.

Not only men will benefit from the new vision: ‘[w]oman … has already suffered too much through man’s own thoughtlessness and brutality, and this has debased the

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10 Steiner, Real Presences, p. 99.
11 ‘Introduction’ to Twelve French Poets, p. lvi. Saison en Enfer was published in 1873.
12 ‘Introduction’ to Twelve French Poets, p. lv.
13 ‘Introduction’ to Twelve French Poets, p. liv.
14 ‘Introduction’ to Twelve French Poets, p. lv.
whole relationship between the sexes. Here again a fresh start must be made to establish a more equitable society.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, while supposedly favourable to women, this new way of seeing things is mooted not in accordance with a rational demand for women’s emancipation rooted in the Enlightenment but with a sub-rational, relativist framework.

In a context in which discourse apparently has no reliable access to external reality and consequent appeals to truth are illusory, the poet is somehow said to offer new access to reality offering new ‘truths’ of ‘universal validity’. In a context in which the consciousness of the subject is deconstructed, a new form of subjectivity comes to the fore. The focus of identity shifts from the rational, conscious self to the sensory, imaginative and possibly monstrous, sub-rational self. All this must be conveyed to the world for the good of society, a moral goal that begs the question of how it is to be communicated in the absence of linguistic efficacy. It is this climate that is said to affect the emancipatory thrust of feminism. A philosophical frame of linguistic non-reference takes on the character of self-reference explored through the inner world, in particular in McFague’s ‘subject-subjects’ model outlined below.

\textbf{B. A ‘subject-subjects’ model?}

I have drawn attention to Rimbaud’s way of coming to terms with reality in order to compare it with the method adopted by McFague. Her motivation for the construction of theological models is said to include the modernist thrust for the emancipation of women: a key theological task for our time, according to McFague, is to engage with

\textsuperscript{15} ‘Introduction’ to \textit{Twelve French Poets}, p. lii.
‘the rise of those dispossessed because of gender, race or class’. But her proposed ‘subject-subjects’ model does not seem to stem from modernist presuppositions. The model bears a strong resemblance to Rimbaud’s method, in that it emphasizes a sub-rational sense of self as a means of access to the world, which also facilitates social responsibility towards the world. An unresolved conflict between modernist and postmodern frameworks appears to underlie McFague’s writing.

Rimbaud stresses the social responsibility of the poet. McFague lays equal stress on the social responsibility of the theologian. But McFague takes a step towards the office of the poet in her plea for a ‘remythologizing’ of the relationship between God and the world. Her project is imaginative and sensory, deriving impetus from the inner life. But, unlike Rimbaud, she does not appear to find any demons in the inner world. She pursues what she calls an ‘ecological model of self and world’ with a sense of self or identity constituted through contact with nature. She writes:

Our assumption is that how we see the world, whether with an arrogant or a loving eye, depends on our deepest, most basic sense of self in relation to the world. Our thesis is that a sense of self coming from touch rather than sight gives us a way to think about ourselves as profoundly embodied, relational, responsive beings, created to love others, not to control them.

This sense of self is part of ‘a way to think about ourselves’, i.e. part of the model. Within the model, the process is circular. The deepest sense of self derives from being ‘in touch’ with ‘the natural world’. This sense of self then acts upon the conscious, perceiving self encouraging a sense of social responsibility and ‘embodiment’ that feeds into the inner life.

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16 McFague, Models of God, pp. x-xi. See Chapter 1 of this thesis.
17 McFague, Models of God, p. 192, n. 37.
18 See McFague, Models of God, chapter 2. See also Chapter 1 of this thesis.
19 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, p. 98.
20 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, p. 92.
Chapter 3 noted McFague’s wish to engage in the ‘subjectification of the world’.  

As part of a way to think about ourselves and the world, her model goes so far as to endow nature with subjection:

In the [ecological] model the self is not just related to nature; rather nature is constitutive of the self ... not only are we body but nature is spirit (or subject, soul – whatever we call that part of ourselves that we consider “more than” nature).  

McFague adds that the ‘in-touch model of being and knowing insists on a continuum’ but not ‘fusion’ between humanity and the natural world. This is in accordance with her project of producing a new sensibility towards the natural world in which the self can be related to the world on equal terms.

Several points are raised by McFague’s proposal. It can be asked firstly: where is the external other in her suggested model? Steiner describes Rimbaud’s relationship to exteriority as occurring through ‘splintered images of other and “momentary” selves’, while ‘the heart of consciousness’ is vacant and deconstructed. In McFague’s proposal, the possibility that the natural world will become an extension of the self or multiple selves is perhaps not far away. But, secondly and conversely, the heart of consciousness is not entirely vacant for McFague. There are, in fact, two aspects to the proposal with regard to identity: the identity of the model-maker and of the self within the model. As Whitford notes, the feminist thrust for emancipation has not abandoned subjectivity and this is evident, seemingly, in the assertion that the model is ‘a way to think about ourselves’. At the same time McFague purports to sit lightly with her models. Despite the Rimbaud-like passion for social responsibility that appears in the ‘ecological model of self and world’, she describes her models at one

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See McFague, Super, Natural Christians, p.112.

McFague, Super, Natural Christians, p. 104. See also Chapter 3.
point as ‘mostly fiction’. This brings me to the third point. Her premise that God can only be seen through human picturing affects the reference that the model has towards the external world. Fourthly, she uses the language but not the method of science. These points are elaborated below.

McFague proposes that an ‘arrogant’ Western perspective on the natural world should be replaced by a more ‘loving’, interactive perspective. I argue, however, that her starting-point of human perspective militates against her aim of interaction with nature. McFague presents her subject-subjects model as a new departure from a subject-object model, stemming from the Enlightenment. But at this point a problem emerges. Relationship between the self and the world occurs within the model. A model is a construct or object made by an external model-maker. The external subject is still not in relation with external reality unless there is a method of ensuring that the model accords to some degree with external reality. The relationship between the subject who conceives the model and other ‘subjects’ is still a subject-object one if the other so-called subjects only operate within the model.

McFague’s antithesis of subject-object versus subject-subject models appears to oversimplify what is going on in terms of subject and object. In her proposed ‘subject-subjects’ model, there is an external subject (‘we’ who see the world) producing a model (i.e. an object). Within the model, the subject relates to the natural world in being constituted by nature through a deep sense of self. Within the model the process is such that the subject confers subject-hood (or a spiritual persona) on the natural world. Within the model, the human subject relates to the natural world as subject.

25 See McFague, *Super, Natural* Christians, pp. 3-4; chapter 2.
But the model does not offer a method of establishing a relationship between the external subject and the external natural world.

McFague describes her approach as a view of truth ‘with a heavy stress on what the implications of certain ways of seeing things (certain models) are for the quality of both human and non-human life’. 26 One difficulty with stress on ways of seeing things is that focus centres on the way of seeing rather than on what is seen of the external reality. McFague proposes that humanity has a moral duty to see things in a particular way, one that will promote the quality of both human and non-human life. But if the focus is not centred on the external reality, the possibility of promoting the quality of life is lessened in real terms. On the assumption that the only way we have of reaching external reality is by creating versions of it, the proposed moral duty will be exercised towards created versions or models of reality rather than towards external reality itself.

I have ventured to draw a diagram of McFague’s subject-subjects model. The solid lines of the box around, and of the arrows in, the diagram are my attempt to indicate a lack of relationship between the model and external reality (see below):

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Borrowing a notion from contemporary science, McFague describes this construct as ‘the ecological model of self and the world’ which interprets ‘the human self’s relation to the world as one instance of ecological interrelationship and interdependence’.\(^\text{27}\) One difficulty with a subject-subjects *model* is the problem of how the external world can be regarded as a ‘subject’ on equal terms with the model-maker, if the prior assumption is that the model is not said to correspond with external reality. McFague states that ‘the only way we have of reaching [external reality] is by creating versions of it’ and that there is ‘no way behind our constructions to test them for their correspondence with the reality they presume to represent’.\(^\text{28}\) In attempting to establish a subject-subjects model, however, she also states that ‘a combination of scientific knowledge, empathy and aesthetic distance can join to produce sketches of

natural subjects in their own worlds that are closer to these worlds than would be works of either imagination or science. 29 But the prior philosophical claim that models cannot be tested for correspondence to external reality is not retracted. What then does she mean by ‘closer’? And how can science operate in the absence of correspondence to external reality?

The attempt to establish a subject-subjects model is part of McFague’s project to ‘remythologize the relation between God and the world’. 30 Our only access to God, according to McFague, is through human models. 31 This premise about God colours McFague’s thinking about the relation of her proposed model to external reality. Given that our only access to God is through human picturing, models of God cannot be tested for correspondence with external reality. If our picturing about God is not open to verification, picturing about the relation of God to the world will not be open to verification either. This necessarily affects picturing about the world per se. It also places a certain distance between model-maker and the model. While a sense of self is prominent in the model, there is a disjunction of identity between the model-maker who consciously controls the model and the self within the model. Within the model, the process by which contact with nature feeds into the sense of self supports a sense of self that is received rather than controlling. This raises the possibility of two sources of identity: an externally constructing identity and an internally constructed identity, both of human origin. Such sources of identity would seem a far cry from the imago Dei in which human identity is received from, and patterned on, the self-existing Godhead. The kind of God that McFague depicts arising from her attempt to

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29 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, p. 115.
30 McFague, Models of God, xi. See also the series outline of McFague’s project in Super, Natural Christians, p. 2
31 McFague, Models of God, p. 192, n. 37.
merge religion and science (to the detriment, I would argue, of both) is considered further in section D of this chapter.

McFague describes herself as an ‘erstwhile Barthian’.\textsuperscript{32} While both she and Barth attempt, in very different ways, to correct the effect of thinking stemming from the Enlightenment, neither, perhaps, is sufficiently critical of the subject-object method stemming from the Enlightenment philosophical heritage. As observed above, McFague describes her approach as a view of truth ‘with a heavy stress on what the implications of certain ways of seeing things (certain models) are for the quality of both human and non-human life’.\textsuperscript{33} It is this kind of approach that seems to underlie her ‘ecological model of self and world’. As noted in Chapter 1 of this thesis, McFague presents a model of God in which human beings as the \textit{imago Dei} are said to reveal the God-world relationship in a special way.\textsuperscript{34} As I understand her, McFague extends this kind of thinking into a full-scale soteriology in relation to her cosmology. A comparison with Barth’s soteriology in relation to his cosmology may help here.

Both Barth and McFague present a cosmology that begins with salvation. In a letter to Bultmann (Basel, 24 December 1952), Barth writes:

\begin{quote}
As I see it, one can and should read all theology in some sense backwards from [the one central figure in the NT]: down to anthropology, ethics and then methodology … I have not become “orthodox” for this reason. I could list for you the points at which I have diverted a good deal from the paths of what can
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{32} Sallie McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, p. 208.
\textsuperscript{33} McFague, \textit{Models of God}, p. 192, n. 37.
\textsuperscript{34} McFague, \textit{Models of God}, pp. 135-136.
meaningfully be called “orthodoxy” and will continue to diverge on the stretches that are before me.  

In the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth describes the relation of Christ to creation in terms of reading history backwards:

What [the New Testament writers] have in view is the kingdom of God drawn near; the turning-point of the times, revealed in the name of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of all the promises of the covenant of grace. To give to the Bearer of this name the honour due to Him, or rather to bear witness to the honour which He has, they venture the tremendous assertion that the world was created through Him and in Him as through God, and in God, in God’s eternal will and purpose.

In this perspective, the one central figure of the New Testament, representing ‘the turning-point of the times’, appears to take on, in the sense of being retrospectively endowed with, a certain supra-historical persona. The approach does not have the same narrative direction as Augustine’s statement: ‘when the fullness of time came she was sent …’

Elsewhere Barth goes so far as to distinguish between ‘the historical Jesus’ and ‘Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God’. In doing so, Barth makes a distinction between ‘history’ and ‘real happening’:

However it may be with the historical Jesus, it is certain that Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God, belongs neither to history nor to psychology; for what is historical and psychological is as such corruptible. The resurrection of Christ, or his second coming, which is the same thing, is not a historical event … our concern here is with an event which, though it is the only real happening in history is not a real happening of” history.

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36 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/1, p. 54.
37 Augustine, *The Trinity*, IV, 27.
McFague employs a similar distinction between the chronological direction of history and the soteriological direction of history. She calls ‘evolutionary history’ the ‘common creation story’, stating that, ‘salvation is the direction of creation and creation is the place of salvation’.\(^{39}\) In other words, ‘evolutionary history’ in its linear trajectory, supplies the ‘place’ or theatre for salvation’s retrospective function:

Some natural theologies, theologies that begin with creation, try to make the claim that evolutionary history contains a teleological direction, an optimistic arrow, but our claim is quite different. It is a retrospective, not a prospective claim; it begins with salvation, with experiences of liberation and healing that one wagers are from God, and reads back into creation the hope that the whole creation is included within the divine liberating, healing powers. It is a statement of faith, not of fact; it takes as its standpoint a concrete place where salvation has been experienced – in the case of Christians, the paradigmatic ministry of Jesus and similar ministries of his disciples in different, particular places – and projects the shape of these ministries onto the whole. What is critical, then, in this point of view about the common creation story is not that this story tells us anything about God or salvation, but, rather, that it gives us a new, contemporary picture with which to remythologize Christian faith.\(^{40}\)

McFague’s soteriological method is one of projection. She declares that her soteriology is a statement of faith, not of fact, operating retrospectively on the history of the world. The ‘paradigmatic ministry of Jesus and similar ministries of his disciples in different, particular places’ span her cosmological framework in a non-chronological way to offer redemptive hope to ‘evolutionary history’.

McFague asserts that her soteriological paradigm is a ‘statement of faith, not of fact’. What she means by ‘faith’ may be less than clear, given that she describes her kind of theology as ‘mostly fiction’.\(^{41}\) Since I believe that McFague is in some sense influenced by Barth’s method, further examination of Barth’s perspective may be in


order here. Barth dissociates his theology from that of rationalist nineteenth century German Protestants who accommodated theology to philosophy:

[The 19th-century theologians focused their attention on one particular point in relation to all the various world-views of their time: man’s supposedly innate and essential capacity to “sense and taste the infinite” as Schleiermacher said, or the “religious a priori” as later affirmed by Troeltsch.]

Such theology seems to have shared the Kantian legacy of a soul-body divide in which the concept or ‘religious idea’, to use Tyrrell’s terminology, was primary and the narrative content of the religion had a secondary function, which could be ‘demythologized’. Barth describes how he initially reacted against nineteenth theology by going to the opposite extreme of emphasizing God’s deity, ‘the image and concept of a “wholly other”’:

We viewed this “wholly other” in isolation, abstracted and absolutised, and set it over against man, this miserable wretch – not to say boxed his ears with it – in such a fashion that it continually showed greater similarity to the deity of the God of the philosophers than to the deity of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Barth goes on to say that he later modified the ‘image and concept’ of the ‘wholly other’: ‘It is when we look at Jesus Christ that we know decisively that God’s deity does not exclude, but includes His humanity’. The question is: where does this concept of ‘Jesus Christ’ stand in relation to the historical Jesus?

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Barth describes his theological method as deductive in nature: ‘From the fact that God is human … [it] follows first of all … [that ‘man’] is the being whom God willed to exalt as his covenant-partner …’\(^{46}\) Barth continues:

We must affirm as second consequence the fact that through the humanity of God, a quite definite theme is given to \textit{theological} culture in particular … Since God in His deity is human, this culture must occupy itself … with the man-encountering God and the God-encountering man and with their dialogue and history, in which their communion takes place and comes to its fulfilment. For this reason theology can think and speak only as it looks at Jesus Christ and from the vantage point of what He is.\(^{47}\)

Barth begins with the concept that ‘God is human’. From the concept arise secondary consequences: the covenant-partnership of ‘man-encountering God’ and the biblical narrative with which ‘man’ must occupy himself. In other words, while Barth dissociates himself from a nineteenth century human perspective on religion in favour of seeing humanity from a divine perspective (or divine enclosing human perspective),\(^{48}\) Barth does not dissociate himself from a nineteenth century theological division between the conception that governs the perspective and the narrative embodiment of it.

Nevertheless, Barth disagrees with the kind of ‘demythologizing’ that would jettison the narrative. For Barth, the biblical narrative refers back to the \textit{concept}. In the \textit{Church Dogmatics}, he writes:

> Among the signs of the objective reality of revelation we have to understand certain definite events and relations and orders within the world … Their nature as signs does not rest on a capacity resident in these particular creaturely realities as such, either to be or to become testimonies to revelation. Nor does it rest on any \textit{analogia entis}. It rests upon the divine foundation and institution.\(^{49}\)

\(^{46}\) Barth, ‘The Humanity of God’, p. 50.
\(^{48}\) See Barth, ‘The Humanity of God’, p. 47.
\(^{49}\) Karl Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics I/II}, p. 224.
Epistemologically, Barth begins with the concept of the ‘divine foundation and institution’ rather than with the narrative that supplies the content for it. For Barth, the creaturely realities do not point, or become testimonies, to revelation. Rather the signs illustrate the concept. From the vantage point of the prior concept of ‘Jesus Christ’, theological culture must occupy itself with the biblical narrative.

Barth’s theological position has philosophical consequences. Bultmann writes to him: ‘It has become increasingly plain to me that you have no inner relationship to history, such as you so strongly have to idealistic philosophy’.50 Elsewhere Barth writes:

Biblical history in the Old and New Testaments is not really history at all, but seen from above is a series of free divine acts and seen from below a series of fruitless attempts to undertake something in itself impossible.51

Barth’s Nestorian-like distinction between views ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ produces a hiatus between the divine perspective and creaturely reality even in terms of biblical history.

Nevertheless, Barth discerns a correspondence between creaturely reality and God’s humanity:52 the concept of God’s humanity has ‘corresponding’ consequences. Seen from above, is ‘the mystery in which [God] meets us in the existence of Jesus Christ’. Barth states that God wants ‘in His freedom actually not to be without man but with him and in the same freedom not against him but for him… [In God’s] free affirmation of man, His free concern for him, His free substitution for him – this is

51 Karl Barth, The Word of God and the Word of Man, p. 72.
And consequent to the concept of God’s humanity is the covenant partnership and history, as noted earlier. For Barth, such consequences ‘result from the fact the we are asked about the correspondence – here the concept of analogy may come into its right – of our thinking and speaking with the humanity of God’. The question is: what kind of analogy is meant here?

Graham Ward cites ‘a famous attack on Barth’ by Richard Roberts:

Wherever the content of revelation and its time draws close to the reality common to humanity, ambiguity results, because the “reality” of revelation must both affirm and deny, recreate and annihilate at the same moment. This ambiguity is consistent with the double-edged quality of much of Barth’s talk of man … and is based upon the fundamental theological developments which led to the adoption of the “analogy of faith”.

Ward observes that for Roberts, ‘this “ambiguity” is the great logical flaw whereby the Church Dogmatics rides above us like a Cathedral on a vast cloud’. Ward argues further that this ‘ambiguity’ is ‘a precursor for Derrida’s différance’.

As I understand him, Ward suggests Barth’s ‘analogy of faith’ illustrates an unresolved tension of language between Barth’s description of views ‘from above’ and ‘from below’. Such a textual strategy, says Ward, would place Barth’s theological language in an allegorical relation to the tension that lies behind it. Ward detects a similarity here to Derrida’s textual strategy:

Discourse, for Derrida, is ‘allegorical metonymy’…. ‘Metonymy’ refers here to the unending chain of signifiers, each differing from each other, each displacing the meaning of the other … Allegorical metonymy is, therefore,

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another description of the economy of *différance*. Barth’s theology of the Word as a theological reading of *différance* is, then, *allegoria fidei* rather than *analogia fidei*.56

To my mind, however, Barth’s ‘analogy of faith’ is more readily detected in the allegorical relation of the *content* of revelation to the *concept* of God enclosing humanity which is prior to it. Nevertheless, I would agree that the kind of relation that Barth’s view of the content of revelation bears to common human experience can be aptly likened to that of a Cathedral riding above us on a vast cloud.57 In this sense, the view ‘from above’ is superimposed on the view ‘from below’.

At this point I return to a comparison of Barth’s method with McFague’s. Like Barth, McFague discerns two disconnected realities: the reality of ‘faith’ and the reality of the ‘common creation story’ or ‘evolutionary history’. McFague identifies the ministry of Jesus and his disciples as ‘paradigmatic’, i.e. illustrative of the ‘wager’ or assumed *concept* that ‘experiences of liberation and healing’ are from God.58 She


57 The sense that the language of faith operates like a great Cathedral riding above ordinary ways of speaking and thinking is borne out by A. N. Prior’s depiction of ‘Barthian Protestant’ in a fictitious dialogue about the possibility of the discussion of religion in secular terms. ‘Barthian Protestant’ argues: ‘I have always felt that it must be possible to give an adequate explanation of religious faith on the hypothesis that it is an illusion … It is also possible to explain the fact of faith, and the corresponding sociological fact of Israel and the Church, on the assumption that it is *not* an illusion – that God is real, and faith is his gift, and “sacred history” the story of his strategy … I have held that … there is nothing to choose between the two [hypotheses], and that one just jumps the way one has to. Faith … is an inward miracle of God’s mercy … I do not begin … with doctrines that look rational but prove not to be so, but present you with “nonsense” right from the jump … Of course, the laws of thought and the laws of grammar, forbid us to confess our faith … But God, with whom all things are possible, comes to our rescue, and takes up our words and our thoughts and makes them carry his meaning … ’ (I have quoted key points from two consecutive speeches by ‘Barthian Protestant’ here. See ‘Can Religion be Discussed’, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by Antony Flew & Alisdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1963), pp. 7-9). Prior comments: ‘This is not a wild guess at what Barth might [say]. The idea that nonsense may be given sense by a sheer act of omnipotence is repeated again and again in his *Prolegomena to Church Dogmatics*’. (See p. 9, n. 12.)

58 Cf. Chapter 2 in which it is argued that McFague’s models bear an allegorical relation to (i.e. are illustrative of) the prior concept.
then ‘projects the shape of these ministries onto the whole’, i.e. onto ‘evolutionary’
history.\textsuperscript{59} Similarly, Barth uses the language of ‘projection’ in describing the relation
between ‘the Bible’ and ‘life’: ‘a new world projects itself into our old ordinary
world’.\textsuperscript{60}

Apart from his apparent influence on McFague,\textsuperscript{61} Barth’s theological method
impinges on the search for women’s identity since it seems to result in some negative
consequences for women. The way in which Barth’s method resembles and contrasts
with the method of McFague’s ‘subject-subjects’ model is considered in the next
section. Catherine Keller also engages with Barth’s method and claims to present a
theology that is diametrically opposed to it. The next section engages with the
alternative views of Barth, Keller and McFague in terms of key issues for women’s
identity.

\textit{C. Two sources of identity?}

Luce Irigaray contends that women want to find a place ‘from whence they might
… create \textit{themselves}'.\textsuperscript{62} As with McFague’s proposal, this assertion follows the
pattern of two sources of identity. There is the \textit{constructing} identity of the female
model-makers and a \textit{constructed} identity of self-creation within the ‘place’ or model.
The \textit{constructing} identity is the primary source for the sense of self. The \textit{constructed}
identity receives its cogency from it. As noted in Chapter 1, Irigaray’s attempt to
create identity for women leads her to distance herself from the biblical creation story.

\textsuperscript{59} McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, p. 181. See above.
\textsuperscript{60} See Barth, \textit{The Word of God and the Word of Man}, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{61} McFague, however, describes her previous experience as ‘an erstwhile Barthian’ in terms of
her dissociation \textit{from} a Protestant lack of sympathy to a ““nature” spirituality’. (See \textit{The Body
of God}, p. 208.) As far as I know, she does not acknowledge any indebtedness \textit{to} Barth.
Catherine Keller continues along the same line. She sketches an alternative beginning to the creation story, identifying the *tehom* of Genesis 1:2 as a feminized locus for creation. In doing so, Keller claims to offer the reverse of Karl Barth’s cosmology. This section begins with Keller’s pattern of two sources of identity as the other side of Barth.

Chapter 1 noted Keller’s presentation of Genesis 1:2 contrary to an alleged traditional reading. Traditionally, according to Keller, ‘the Word of the Creator’ unifies itself over *against* the feminized chaos. In this context she describes her proposed reading of Genesis 1:2 as opposed to Barth’s presentation of creation:

> What if we begin instead to read the Word from the vantage point of its own fecund multiplicity, its flux into flesh, its overflow … Inversely to Barth’s *logocentric doctrine of the creation*, a *tehomic theology derives the incarnation from the chaotic width of creation*. A chaotic Christ would represent the flow of a word that was always already materialized, more and less and endlessly, a flow that unblocks the hope of an incarnation, in which all flesh takes part.

According to this description, Barth proposes a cosmology summed up in the Incarnation while Keller proposes an Incarnation summed up in the cosmology.

Keller describes Barth’s doctrine of creation as ‘logocentric’. But what does Barth mean by the Logos? Epistemologically, as argued earlier, Barth *begins* with the concept of the ‘God enclosing humanity’ summed up in ‘Jesus Christ’ rather than with the biblical narrative. Consequently, for Barth the concept of ‘Jesus Christ’

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64 See Keller, *Face of the Deep*, pp. 18-19. My italics. Keller writes: ‘Barth never quite affirms the classic creation from nothing. He does it one better: the fathers were too soft on chaos. God would not create *from* such horror.’ Keller cites Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III/I*, p. 105. Cf also Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III/I*, p. 109: ‘As this Word is spoken and repeated in the history of the covenant … it is thereby constantly decided that the *hay-thah* of chaos is final – this world *was*. God will not allow the cosmos to be definitively bewitched and demonised or His creation totally destroyed, nor will He permit the actual realisation of the dark possibility of Gen. 1:2.’
overrides the sequential nature of the biblical narrative. This perspective affects Barth’s perception of Wisdom. Barth describes Christ as like the ‘wisdom’ of the Old Testament:

He to whom the New Testament ascribes participation in creation has only divine and human form, like the ‘wisdom’ of the Old Testament. He is not an ‘intermediate being’. He is the divine person who acts, suffers and triumphs as man… He is the Mediator between God and man, like the ‘wisdom’ of the Old Testament.  

Wisdom, as Barth admits, was in some sense acknowledged beyond Judaism at the time of Christ:

It is now known that the writers of the New Testament found themselves on prepared ground inasmuch as the notion of a second divine being assisting in the work of creation had become general in their day. What they ascribe to Jesus Christ [e.g. in Colossians 1:17; John 1:1; Hebrews 1:2] was not only ascribed by Philo to the Logos but also to the syncretistic theosophy and cosmology of the time. But Barth distances himself from the syncretistic background. In emphasizing the divine person who acts, suffers and triumphs as man, Barth relativises the prior existence of the Logos:

It has to be kept in mind that the whole concept of the λόγος ἄσαρκος, the ‘second person’ of the Trinity, as such, is an abstraction. It is true that it has shown itself necessary to the christological and trinitarian reflections of the Church …The New Testament speaks plainly enough about the Jesus Christ who existed before the world was but …it does not speak of the eternal Son or Word as such, but of the Mediator, the One who in the eternal sight of God has already taken upon Himself our human nature, i.e. not of a formless Christ who might well be a Christ principle.

65 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III/1* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970), p. 53. Cf. McFague, *Models of God*, p. 208, n. 33: ‘Current research on the relationship of Sophia to the Logos claims that their roles were similar and eventually became competitive, with the female, subordinate one giving over to the male equal one: Sophia was absorbed by the Logos, the Son who is equal to the Father.’

66 Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III/1*, p. 52.

67 Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III/1*, p. 54. My italics.
By contrast, Augustine uses a syncretistic interpretation of the Logos as a basis for apologetics:

We know what Porphyry, as a Platonist, means by ‘principles’. He refers to God the Father, and God the Son, whom he calls in Greek the Intellect or Mind of the Father … But this Platonist failed to see that Christ [as the Word ‘through whom everything came into existence’] was the ‘principle’. 68

For Augustine, what Porphyry terms the ‘Intellect or Mind of the Father’, i.e. Wisdom, becomes flesh. For Barth, as I understand him, the ‘λόγος ἄσαρκος’ cannot be said tout simple to become flesh since in the mystery of God for humanity, Christ ‘has already taken upon Himself our human nature’ before the world was created. 69

I would argue that Barth’s perspective of ‘the eternal sight of God’ has the tendency to make creation, as well as redemption, part of a divine idea in which creation is drawn up into Christ already perceived as human before creation actually exists. In this sense creation is also part of a disembodied idea rather than a historical event. Within the divine idea, Christ is said to be both the divine source (assisting in the work of creation) and also the man (who acts as mediator). But God is the subject, external to the divine idea, while Christ is the dominant figure within the idea. In this presentation, as Barth admits, the λόγος ἄσαρκος functions as an abstraction, prior to the historical Incarnation. 70

68 Augustine, City Of God, X, 23, 24.
69 Barth, Church Dogmatics, III/1, p. 54. See above. Cf. also the discussion of the ‘logos asarkos’ in Charles T. Waldrop, Karl Barth’s Christology: Its Basic Alexandrian Character (Berlin: Mouton, 1984), pp. 46- 54.
70 George Hunsinger writes that for Barth: ‘An abstraction is a kind of misplaced concreteness. It takes something that is necessary but not sufficient and treats it as though it was both … Concreteness depends on ascribing centrality to Jesus Christ’. (See Introduction to Karl Barth, God Here and Now, translated by Paul Van Buren (London: Routledge, 2003, p. viii). This thesis argues that ascribing centrality to Jesus Christ has the effect of de-emphasizing the actuality of Wisdom prior to the Incarnation.
Can Barth’s cosmology be said to be the inverse of Keller’s? Ward’s claim that Barth’s ‘analogy of faith’ resembles Derrida’s *différance* would appear to cast doubt on the ‘logocentric’ nature of Barth’s presentation. Barth’s emphasis on the eternal sight of God provides a way of thinking that, in fact, bears some resemblance to the suggestion that women should create themselves. Such a way of thinking involves an external subject and an idea or model produced by the external subject. On the other hand, Keller and Barth present very different subjects and cosmological models. In Barth’s cosmology, the external subject is God. In Keller’s cosmology the external subject is identified as the human (and female) ‘we’. In Barth’s cosmological idea as perceived by God, the dominant figure is Christ. In Keller’s cosmological model, the dominant figure is the *tehom* or feminized chaos. To this extent, I would agree with Keller that her cosmology is the inverse of Barth’s.

What then has Barth’s cosmology to say about the possibility of two sources of human identity? In Keller’s presentation, the human ‘we’ supplies a source of constructing identity. Within the model the *tehom* is mythologized on feminine terms, constituting a means by which women’s identity may be constructed. For Barth, God is the external source of meaning. Within the divine idea Christ is both human and divine. Human identity may be said to be constructed in two senses, receiving meaning from the divine viewer and also through Christ within the divine idea. But it must be asked in how far the function of the divine guarantor rests on the prior concept of God. To this extent the concept would constitute a source of constructing identity. These ambivalent sources of meaning may perhaps underlie

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Barth’s movement away from a ‘logocentric’ approach towards what Ward identifies as ‘the precursor of différance’.

While both Keller and Barth appear to present two sources of identity, Keller’s presentation favours female identity, in emphasizing the femininity of the tehom, while Barth’s presentation favours male identity, in emphasizing the humanity of Christ and de-emphasizing the significance of Wisdom. Further, Barth’s description of Mary’s role in the ‘miracle of Christmas’ de-emphasizes positive identity for women:

To what is to begin here man is to contribute nothing by his action and initiative. Man is not simply excluded, for the Virgin is there. But the male, as the specific agent of human action and history, with his responsibility for directing the human species, must now retire into the background, as the powerless figure of Joseph. That is the Christian reply to the question of woman: here the woman stands absolutely in the foreground, moreover the virgo, the Virgin Mary. God did not choose man in his pride and in his defiance, but man in his weakness and humility, not man in his historical role, but man in the weakness of his nature as represented by the woman, the human creature who can confront God only with the words, ‘Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according as Thou hast said’. 72

For Barth, the ‘woman’ represents the impotence of creaturely reality before God. He continues: ‘We must not think of making a merit of this handmaid existence nor attempt once more to ascribe a potency to the creature’. 73

But this is not all. Having said that ‘the woman’ represents creaturely dependence, Barth takes his presentation one step further. Since God is in no sense dependent on the consent of the ‘woman’, the reality of the Incarnation is in no sense dependent on

73 Cf., however, C. S. Lewis ‘Priestesses in the Church’?, p. 89: ‘All salvation depends on the decision which [the Blessed Virgin] made in the words Ecce ancilla’. Cf. also Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ paragraph 11: ‘Mary’s part … is that of free and unqualified consent’. 210
the miracle of Christmas: ‘The true Godhead and the true humanity of Jesus Christ in their unity do not depend on the fact that Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary’. The miracle of Christmas is, nevertheless, important. But it is important only as it depends on a prior understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation:

[E]very time people want to fly from this miracle, a theology is at work, which has ceased to understand and honour … the mystery of the unity of God and man in Jesus Christ, the mystery of God’s free grace. And on the other hand, where this mystery has been understood and men have avoided any attempt at natural theology, because they had no need of it, the miracle came to be thankfully and joyously recognised. It became, we might say, an inward necessity at this point.74

Not only does the ‘woman’ represent the impotence of the creature before God but the story about the ‘woman’ has no potency to point to the mystery. Rather, the miracle is an ‘inward necessity’, secondary to the prior concept of the reality of the Incarnation.

Barth’s understanding of the *imago Dei* follows a similar pattern. Chapter 3 noted that Barth identifies the *imago Dei* with Christ. Under the old covenant, human ontology does not ascend to the dignity of the *imago Dei*, since Adam and Seth and all the subsequent members of the genealogical tree only indicate it or establish its physical possibility. For Barth, the ‘man’ Jesus Christ is the *imago Dei*, while the Church (qua woman) is only in the image of God through Christ (qua man). This primary understanding of the *imago Dei* has a secondary application to individual men and women.75

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74 Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 100.
75 Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/I*, p. 203.
That humanity in general participates in the imago Dei in a secondary sense is, according to Barth, discernable in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16:

There is no need for us to pursue at this point the anthropological equation in respect of this relationship between man and wife as Paul develops it in 1 Corinthians 11…It is obvious that all that he had to say about man and woman was seen from this angle, in the light of the relationship between Jesus Christ and His community, and therefore of His divine likeness, and that it is only in this way that it is presented as an ‘order of creation’. We must be content merely to assert that the agreement of Paul’s teaching with Genesis 1:26 f. must not be underestimated in this respect (where it is often overlooked).76

Barth appears to describe the relation of the ‘woman’ (i.e. the church) to Christ in terms of equality with Christ, since she is ‘side by side’ with him. But equality only impinges here on the image of God. It does not address the question of the ‘woman’ sharing the divinity of Christ. As noted in the previous section, Barth discerns a correspondence or analogy between the concept of God’s humanity in ‘Jesus Christ’ and the consequences of this ‘fact’ as they appear in the covenant relationship. I am unsure in how far Barth’s use of the ‘analogy’ is to be understood as coterminous with ‘image’ but, to my mind, ambiguity is compounded with regard to the ontological position of ‘the woman’, who at best would have a subsidiary role in the prior concept.

But there is a further way in which the ‘woman’ (i.e. the church) does not share the dignity of the ‘man’ (i.e. Jesus) in Barth’s presentation. The way in which Barth understands the ‘man’ and the ‘woman’ to be in God’s image is complex if not contradictory. Barth critiques ‘Augustine and his followers’ for making the imago Dei

76 Barth, Church Dogmatics, III/1, p. 205.
a capacity of the soul. Nevertheless he appears to conceive the imago Dei in a capacity for ‘differentiation and relationship’ between an ‘I’ and ‘Thou’:

Man is created by God in correspondence with this relationship and differentiation in God Himself: created as a Thou that can be addressed by God but also as an I responsible to God; in the relationship of man and woman in which man is a thou to his fellow and therefore himself an I in responsibility to this claim.

The above quotation has three parts to it. The likeness factor between God and humanity appears in the first and third parts: in correspondence with the relationship and differentiation in God Himself, man is said to be a thou to his fellow and therefore an I in responsibility to this claim. But the middle (italicized) part of the quotation introduces something else: the relationship between man and God. The middle part of the quotation does not explicate how humanity is like God.

In fact, Barth excludes divine likeness from human sexual differentiation, which he presents as accidental to the imago Dei:

The differentiation and relationship between I and Thou in the divine being in the sphere of Elohim are not identical with the differentiation and relationship between male and female. That it takes this form in man, corresponding to bisexuality of animals too, belongs to the creatureliness of man rather than to divine likeness.

The two parties in the imago Dei are not, according to Barth, God and the created order but God and Christ pneumatically connected with the Church:

If Jesus Christ is the image of God, and therefore man, to say ‘Jesus Christ’ is necessarily to speak also of the other – pneumatically, of course and not physically – who was divinely created with man, who with him is addressed by God as a Thou and made responsible to God as an I …

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77 Barth, Church Dogmatics, III/1, pp. 192 – 193.
78 Barth, Church Dogmatics, III/1, p. 198. My italics.
79 Barth, Church Dogmatics, III/1, p. 196.
80 Barth, Church Dogmatics, III/1, p. 200.
But although it purports to concern the imago Dei, this quotation does not refer to a relationship between the ‘man’ and the ‘woman’ at the divine-human level as a reflection of relationship ‘in the sphere of Elohim’. This quotation refers not to likeness between God and ‘man’ but to relationship between God and ‘man’. As such, Barth’s concept of the imago Dei is not concerned with symbolic likeness (even between the divine and divine-human levels).

While differing from it in some respects, the capacity, cited by Barth, of being both a ‘Thou’ and an ‘I’ in relationship with God would seem to have a problem similar to Augustine’s sapientia. The concept is disembodied, and refers to access to God rather than likeness to God. In failing to establish symbolic likeness between God and humanity, the ‘imago Dei’, as Barth presents it, overwhelmingly favours the ‘man’ since relationship with God occurs through Christ as ‘man’. It is, according to Barth, from the standpoint of this woman (i.e. the church), or rather of her Husband, that women can be said to share in the ‘image’ of God.

In ‘The Humanity of God’, Barth outlines three alternative epistemological positions: the existentialist position, his own position which he describes as ‘close to’ the existentialist position, and a possible development of the existentialist position which sounds to me similar to that held by McFague and Keller. I contend that the existentialist nature of all three positions runs counter to the presentation of the imago Dei argued in this thesis. Barth writes:

> It is not yet clear whether and in what sense a genuine, concrete dialogue, history, and communion between God and man is envisioned [in the

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81 See Chapter 2, Section C.
82 See Barth, Church Dogmatics, III/I, p. 203. See also Chapter 3, Section C.
theological existentialism of Rudolf Bultmann and his followers, close to which we find ourselves here] or whether it is concerned merely with a repristination of the theology of the believing individual who reflects on himself in his solitude (this time on his reality and unreality) and explicates himself. The fact that to date neither the people of Israel nor the Christian community appears to have constitutive meaning for his theology causes one concern. And what can be the meaning of the “overcoming of the Subject-Object-Scheme,” recently proclaimed with such special enthusiasm, so long as it is not made clear and guaranteed that this enterprise will not once more lead to the anthropocentric myth and call into question anew the intercourse between God and man and thus the object of theology. Certainly existentialism may have reminded us once again … that one cannot speak of God without speaking of man. It is to be hoped that it will not lead us back into the old error that one can speak of man without first, and very concretely, having spoken of the living God.  

Barth’s fear that, in an attempt to overcome ‘the Subject-Object Scheme’, existentialism might develop into anthropocentric mythology seems to have been realized in McFague’s and Keller’s approaches. Barth distances himself from such a development but he does not distance himself from existentialism per se. For Barth, the individual who reflects upon himself and explicates himself is said to give way to speaking about to the living God but, insofar as Barth’s position is ‘close to’ the existentialist position, the human concept of God is primary. A genuine, concrete dialogue, history, and communion between God and ‘man’ may be envisioned in Barth’s theology but in what sense? Does the ‘dialogue’ speak through the voice of the existentialist thinker? This thesis is couched in terms of a plea that the biblical narrative should be allowed to speak with its own voice.

Barth’s and Keller’s formulations sidestep the biblical tradition that presents Wisdom as a feminine co-creator before the world was made. As Barth notes, the biblical wisdom tradition does not present an ‘intermediate being’ in some Platonized

\[83\] Barth, ‘The Humanity of God’, p. 54.
\[84\] See Proverbs 8.
sense. Nevertheless Wisdom is not remote from the world but closely connected in
that the world was made through her.\textsuperscript{85} Wisdom is prior to and distinct from the
contingent world yet reaching out and wishing to be known, ‘rejoicing in [‘the
Lord’s’] inhabited world and delighting in the human race’ (Proverbs 8:31). To the
degree to which she is first cause Wisdom is the source of values and authentication:

\begin{quote}
And now, my children, listen to me:
happy are those who keep my ways …
For whoever finds me finds life
And obtains favour from the Lord;
but those who miss me injure themselves;
all who hate me love death (Proverbs 8: 32, 35 - 36).
\end{quote}

Incarnate as a man, Wisdom becomes part of contingent creation. That a first cause
becomes contingent is part of the scandal of the Incarnation. But that this man is the
selfsame Wisdom who is from the beginning, is an open secret. ‘I am the way, and
the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’, says Jesus
(John 14:6).\textsuperscript{86} There are those who nevertheless will not follow the ways of Wisdom:

\begin{quote}
To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are
they like? They are like children sitting in the market place and calling
to one another,
‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not weep.’
… Nevertheless wisdom is vindicated by all her children.
(Luke 7:31-32, 35)
\end{quote}

Rather than being an abstraction, the divine Word or Wisdom is a source of created
embodiment and identity. Those who enter into the betrothal to the Word become
flesh are the children who vindicate the validity of Wisdom at the divine level. The
God-man does not appropriate but rather reveals the divine persona of Wisdom in her


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eternal significance; here is the One through whom the world was made, whose way is written into the fabric of creation.

**D. Wisdom and the world**

When we humans talk about God, key questions to ask are: what kind of God are we talking about and how do we know about this God? As noted in Chapter 1, the kind of divinity thought to be present in popular medieval cosmology was, despite some similarities, *not* the God presented in the biblical writings. Nor is a God who becomes incarnate compatible with the kind of God apparently mooted in some postmodern speculation.87 It is not the intention of this thesis to engage with the relation of God to the world (including the Trinitarian understanding behind this relation) beyond what is necessary to support the central argument that women are in the image of Wisdom in relation to God the Father. On the other hand, key feminist writers touch on such matters and, to that extent, an attempt is made to engage with their arguments.88 In particular, the attempt is made here to engage with McFague’s cosmology.

McFague presents her cosmology as ‘a way of speaking of God’s relation to … all creation that “makes sense”’ in terms of an incarnational understanding of Christianity and an organic interpretation of postmodern science’. Such a ‘personal/organic model’ is said to be ‘compatible with interpretations of both Christian faith and contemporary science, although not demanded by either’.89 There are several points here. McFague’s project is firstly an attempt to offer a world-view that ‘makes sense’:

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87 See McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 237, n. 37. Cf. also p. 159: ‘In its traditional form the claim [that the Word became flesh and lived among us] is not only offensive to the integrity and value of other religions, but incredible, indeed, absurd in light of postmodern cosmology’.

88 See also Chapter 6.

it represents a quest for coherence. Secondly, she refers to her understanding of Christianity as ‘incarnational’. What she means by ‘incarnational’ is explored further below; the term raises questions about the relation of Wisdom to the creation and the historical nature of the Christian narrative. Thirdly, McFague’s cosmology is described as ‘a way of speaking’ about God’s relation to creation, raising questions of objectivity and epistemology: how do we know that we know? This section assesses McFague’s cosmology and suggests an alternative approach.

McFague states that the personal/organic cosmological model is ‘not demanded’ either by the Christian faith or contemporary science. The question is: is it endorsed by either? The model is said to refer to the relation of God to the world. As noted in Section B, she presents her soteriology in relation to creation as ‘a statement of faith, not of fact’. It is not clear how a disavowal of factuality can be said to ‘make sense’ in terms of contemporary science. Elsewhere McFague disclaims objective knowledge of God and reality. In how far then is her soteriology compatible with the Christian faith? McFague describes her models of God as ‘mostly fiction’. Further, her personal/organic model disowns the biblical story of creation.

As noted above McFague refers to ‘evolutionary history’ as the ‘the common creation story’. She writes:

At [the] heart of [the contemporary scientific view of reality] is the common creation story … In our new cosmic story, time is irreversible, genuine novelty results through the interplay of chance and law, and the future is open. This is an unfinished universe, a dynamic universe, still in process.

91 See McFague, Models of God, p. 192, n. 37.
92 See McFague, Models of God, pp. xi – xii.
McFague writes that one feature of evolutionary history is ‘its story character: it is a historical narrative with a beginning, middle and presumed end’. For McFague, this ‘historical’ nature of the narrative contrasts with that of other accounts of world history. She goes on to say that other cosmologies ‘including mythic ones such as Genesis and even earlier scientific ones, have not been historical, for in them creation was finished’. This would seem to use the term ‘historical’ to judge the merits of the story: literary considerations, it may be observed, are not the normal convention for distinguishing historicity.

But McFague’s focus is not historicity but soteriology. The ‘story character’ of evolutionary history suggests to her ‘that in our current picture God would be understood as a continuing creator, but of equal importance, we human beings might be seen as partners in creation, as the self-conscious, reflexive part of the creation that could participate in furthering the process’. Such a partnership appears to operate on different terms from the biblical covenant. In saying that the cosmology presented in Genesis is ‘finished’, McFague apparently rules out the history of tragic disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Her retrospective claim for salvation does not include the chronology of a redeemer foreshadowed from the dawn of creation history as recounted in Genesis 3. (McFague’s non-recognition of the biblical chronology of salvation including the promise of a redemptive future will be considered in the next chapter.)

Although her cosmology purports to describe God’s relation to ‘all creation’, McFague’s cosmology does not appear to engage with biblical chronology. The point

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is obscured because McFague describes evolutionary history as ‘the common creation story’. She presents, in fact, two cosmological frameworks. Evolutionary history operates chronologically while salvation operates retrospectively to span evolutionary history. The two are linked because the soteriological framework is projected onto the ‘creational’ framework.

Section B indicated that McFague’s soteriological method in relation to her cosmology may owe something to Barth. Barth also discerns two contrasting cosmological frameworks: he describes life and the Bible as like ‘Scylla and Charybdis’. 96 Like McFague, Barth resolves the discrepancy by projecting the world of the Bible ‘into our old ordinary world’. 97 But, as Bultmann points out, Barth does not ‘perceive the task’ of relating theology to philosophy. 98 Unlike McFague, Barth does not claim to ‘make sense’ between the two frameworks. 99

Despite her disclaimer about knowledge of God and reality, McFagues describes God’s relation to the world in some detail. Within the model, God is presented as ‘the embodied spirit of the universe’. Such a model, claims McFague, ‘does not reduce God to the world nor relegate God to another world; on the contrary it radicalizes both divine immanence (God is the breath of each and every creature) and divine transcendence (God is the energy empowering the entire universe)’. 100 But God is only said to be ‘transcendent’ within the model: the human model-maker is the source

96 Barth, The Word of God and the Word of Man, p. 100.
97 Barth, The Word of God and the Word of Man, p. 37.
99 Cf. Karl Barth, Dogmatics in Outline, p. 51: ‘If we are to take [creation] seriously, it must at once be clear that we are not confronted by a realm which in any sense may be accessible to human view or even to human thought’.
100 McFague, The Body of God, p. 150.
of the ‘transcendent’ God. Transcendence and immanence occur within the model, an approach which governs McFague’s ‘incarnational understanding of Christianity’.

McFague goes so far as to claim support for such an ‘embodied’ God from the biblical writings:

Panentheism is, I would suggest, a strong motif in both Hebrew and Christian traditions that take seriously the mediation of God to the world. These traditions deny, on the one hand, a picture of God as an external super-person (or Unmoved Mover) distant from and alien to the world and, on the other hand, a view of God as immediately available to the mind of human beings or as identified with natural processes. Rather, the panentheistic tradition is found in all those passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that mediate the divine presence through human words and acts as well as natural phenomena and in the New Testament in its central declaration that ‘the Word was made flesh’ in Jesus of Nazareth. In all these instances, mediation and incarnation are central and, therefore, are open to, or ought to be open to, the embodiment of God, especially in its panentheistic form of the world (universe) as God’s body and God as its spirit.\(^1\)

Passages in the Hebrew Scriptures are said to ‘mediate the divine presence through human words and acts’ but in what sense? Here McFague appears to deny communication between God and the mind of human beings.

McFague’s notion of panentheism accords with a God envisaged in terms of human model-making. It is not compatible, however, with the biblical assumption of divine revelation. Such a cosmology would not only contradict the way in which the biblical writings have been traditionally read but also disavow the philosophical possibility of covenantal interaction between God and creation. The central declaration of the New Testament that ‘the Word was made flesh’ does not ‘make sense’ in the face of such a disavowal. As a pre-requisite for her models of God, McFague states that ‘the initial assumption is that God is on the side of life and its fulfilment and the paradigmatic

\(^1\)  McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 150.
figure of Jesus of Nazareth expresses and illuminates this personal, gracious power’.\textsuperscript{102} In McFague’s Christology, the Word does not become flesh. Rather, the flesh expresses and illuminates the Word.

While she uses the word ‘incarnational’, McFague’s model of the panentheistic God is insufficiently radical to admit the Incarnation. If Jesus of Nazareth is a paradigmatic figure of a ‘panentheistic’ God, what becomes of Mary? Keller takes the word ‘incarnation’ a step further than McFague in her proposal that ‘a tehomic theology derives the incarnation from the chaotic width of creation’.\textsuperscript{103} Keller identifies ‘incarnation’ with natural processes. But here the Word does not become flesh. Rather, ‘a chaotic Christ’ represents ‘a word that was always already materialized’. The radical nature of the Word that becomes flesh is absent in such presentations of a ‘panentheistic’ God.

McFague’s presentation of a ‘panentheistic’ God purports to be in accord with an ‘organic interpretation of postmodern science’ but her appeal to the ‘common creation story’ seems to indicate some slippage in the notion of ‘science’. At one point she observes, ‘in science models can be and are tested by investigating the properties one expects to be present and if the expectations prove to be correct, one concludes that the model is a description, albeit imperfect and partial, of reality’.\textsuperscript{104} By contrast she describes the ‘common creation story’ as ‘a narrative … that, while accepted in broad

\textsuperscript{102} McFague, \textit{Models of God}, p. 192, n. 37.
\textsuperscript{104} See McFague, \textit{Metaphorical Theology}, p. 99.
outlines by the majority of contemporary scientists, relies on many assumptions, includes many unknowns, and can be interpreted in a variety of ways …'105

In correspondence with Barth, Bultmann writes that the worldview of ‘science’ is ‘objectifying’, in the sense that it projects a picture of the world:

The situation today appears to me to be this: Man lives with the worldview which is projected by objectifying science; but he is increasingly aware … that he cannot understand his own existence in terms of this worldview … You rightly say that my demythologizing has its source in the insight that the [biblical] 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.106

For Bultmann, the ‘thinking of myth’ offers a dispensable illustration (model or allegory) of an underlying truth. Bultmann includes both biblical ‘mythology’ and ‘objectifying science’ as dispensable in this sense.

Barth agrees that the evolutionary history of ‘natural science’ functions like ‘myth’ but he limits ‘myth’ to pagan mythology:

Natural science … may tell us the tale of millions of years in which the cosmic process has gone on … Continuation is quite a different thing from … sheer beginning, with which the concept of creation and the Creator has to do … At best a [pagan] myth may be a parallel to exact science; that is, a myth has to do with viewing what has always existed and will exist.’107

For Barth, biblical creation is in a separate category from evolutionary ‘myth’.

McFague’s attempt to make cosmological sense in terms of science and theology would seem to retain the ‘myth’ that Bultmann wants to discard while failing to make Barth’s distinction between creation and evolutionary ‘myth’. McFague notes

107 Barth, Dogmatics in Outline, p. 51.
Wolfhart Pannenberg’s objection to Barth’s ‘in principle’ dissociation of the doctrine of creation from scientific descriptions of the world: ‘If theologians want to conceive of God as the creator of the real world, they cannot possibly bypass the scientific description of the world.’ 108 One might ask whether McFague solves the problem by removing a ‘scientific description’ from the real world.

Section B indicated that McFague uses the language but not the method of science. Her attempt to merge ‘science’ and ‘religion’ functions seemingly at the expense of access to external reality, contrary to what both science and religion would, in different ways, traditionally claim. As I understand her, the method wavers at the point of explaining how the natural world can be treated as a ‘subject’ if the model does not permit access to external reality. But she does not change her method to accommodate the point. I would argue that she cannot do so, given that her project of ‘remythologizing’ the relation of God to the world rests on the assumption that God can only be accessed through human picturing. In spite of this McFague quotes physicist Hanbury Brown: ‘If our system of religious beliefs is to form a coherent world-view, as it did in the Medieval Model, it must look outwards to what contemporary science is telling us about the world around us’. 109 But McFague’s notion of models that do not provide access to external reality is not consistent with the notion of looking outwards.


At this point I will take up the quest for a coherent world-view and will be so bold as to make some suggestions about how to achieve it. C. S. Lewis writes that ‘evolutionism, when it ceases to be simply a theorem in biology and becomes a principle for interpreting the total historical process is a form of Historicism’.\(^{110}\) By ‘historicism’, Lewis means a belief that ultimate meaning can be discovered in the historical process without the aid of divine revelation. ‘On certain great events (those embodied in the creeds),’ writes Lewis, ‘we have what I believe to be divine comment which makes plain so much of their significance as we need, and we can bear, to know. On other events, most of which are in any case unknown to us, we have no such comment.’\(^{111}\) In Lewis’s opinion, one should guard against the kind of coherent world-view that comes from embroidering on the modest claims of Christianity and science. Further, while it may be true that the Medieval Model gained some coherence through moulding religious beliefs to the then current scientific understanding, it would seem ironic to uncritically follow the example of a method that produced an undesirably unbiblical result. Hebrew and Christian traditions deny a picture of God as an Unmoved Mover, says McFague.

But even assuming the desirability of something like the Medieval Model in allowing religious beliefs to ‘look outwards’ to contemporary science, McFague’s models can hardly be considered a useful resource for such a project. Unlike McFague’s models, the Medieval Model was able to look outwards, at least to the limits of medieval science. This was due to a philosophy that supported the possibility of looking outwards. Some of the background to this has already been

\(^{110}\) C. S. Lewis, ‘Historicism’, *Christian Reflections* (Glasgow: Fount, 1980), p. 132. Lewis also says that when ‘a village woman says that her wicked father-in-law’s paralytic stroke is a “judgment on him” she is a Historicism’.

\(^{111}\) Lewis, ‘Historicism’, p. 145.
outlined in this thesis. Some further remarks about post-medieval historical developments in relation to a coherent world-view may be helpful, in particular in relation to a coherent source of identity for women.

The notion of looking outwards impinges on the notion of epistemology: how do we know that we know? Such knowledge must include: how do we know that we know who we are? In other words, the notion of access to the external world impinges on the notion of identity. In recent Western history, the notion of objective access to the external world has not been accompanied by a sense of identity with an external epistemological source. McFague writes that René Descartes was ‘the father of the modern notion of objectivity’. She states, however, that the source of knowledge for Descartes was not metaphysical but subjectivist:

For Descartes, knowledge was not to be found through a return to the gods, but by a turn inward, to the individual’s internal thoughts: ‘I think therefore I am.’

McFague quotes feminist philosopher, Lorraine Code:

For each knower, the Cartesian route to knowledge is through private abstract thought, through the efforts of reason unaided either by the senses or consultation with other knowers. It is this individualistic, self-reliant private aspect of Descartes’ philosophy that has been influential in shaping subsequent epistemological ideals.

In the ‘Cartesian’ route to knowledge the gods do not appear to make any epistemological contribution. But, according to Code’s description, the objective, scientific method which explores the universe via the senses in consultation with other ‘knowers’, is not in view either. Some conflict is evident here between science and

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112 See Chapters 1 and 3.
113 McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, p. 74
philosophy. While Descartes may be father to the modern notion of objectivity, the Cartesian epistemological source does not appear to be in accord with the scientific method.

George Steiner places the departure of the epistemological gods at a later date: Cartesian self-consciousness still assumes the concept of a ‘presence’ ensuring a sense of meaning that is ultimately of God.\(^{115}\) While a more recent trend towards deconstruction appears to banish this metaphysical function, Jung discerns a kind of metaphysical rebirth in the archetypes of the inner, subconscious mind.\(^{116}\) The question is whether the spokes of meaning can finally lead to such internalized gods. McFague appears to suggest something of the sort in her project to ‘remythologize’ the relation of God to the world, in which a ‘panentheistic’ God is accessed via a deep and most basic sense of self in touch with spiritualized nature. But, as I understand her, the function that she attributes to ‘God’ is distinct from the function of the old metaphysics. Whatever is credited to ‘God’, in terms of validating identity or anything else, is confined to the model that she constructs. Beyond models of human construction, McFague claims to know nothing about God.\(^{117}\) God does not validate her model. While God may be active within the model, God appears to be entirely passive in a more general sense.

While the departure of the linguistic gods in Steiner’s sense heralds a departure of objectivity, the return of the gods in McFague’s internalized sense does not appear to


\(^{117}\) McFague, *Models of God*, p. 192, n. 37: ‘What prevents models of God from being arbitrary? … [P]ressing the ontological issue … I do not know who God is, but I find some models better than others for constructing an image of God commensurate with my trust in a God as on the side of life. God is and remains a mystery.’ (McFague’s italics)
herald its return. Nonetheless, McFague borrows from contemporary scientific
theory. It would seem that there are two contrasting tendencies in McFague’s project.
On the one hand, she stresses a sceptical attitude towards the possibility of objectivity:
‘There is indeed no way behind our constructions to test them for their
correspondence with the reality they presume to represent’. On the other hand,
contemporary science depends on the assumption that there is indeed a way behind
our constructions to test them for their correspondence with the reality they presume
to represent. McFague writes:

As we criticize Descartes for his understanding of knowledge based on
disembodiment and the subject-object dualism, we must recall that his goal
was ‘objectivity’… the attainment of a neutral, unbiased perspective that
would permit us to know the world ‘as it is’. That goal lies at the heart of
contemporary science...

At the same time, McFague questions the objectivity of science:

The question is who does science and for whose benefit? The feminist
criticism aims at a greater, not a lesser, objectivity for science by broadening
the base of who participates in setting scientific agendas so that science might
be emancipatory, liberating, beneficial for more people – and for the planet
that supports us all.

It should be noted that the test of ‘objectivity’ here is ideological, not scientific. What
McFague does not appear to question is the values that she extols. God is not the
source of those values. God’s love, for instance, is not to be understood as the source
of human love; God’s love can only be imagined through the screen of human
loves. Human ideology appears to be the final epistemological source. What, one

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The context for the quotation is a critique of science’s promotion of militarism and ecological
disaster.
that ‘human loves only conform to the divine pattern’.
may ask, becomes of science and looking outward on such a basis? In a quest for coherence some alternative direction appears necessary.

At this point I return to the question of identity for women. Earlier this chapter considered a feminist dilemma in the face of a postmodern deconstruction of subjectivity. The dilemma consists in a conflict between deconstructionist thinking and the emancipatory thrust of feminism. Yet, as James K. A. Smith reports, deconstruction ‘is a way of making room for the other, and so fundamentally a kind of hospitality and welcome’.\textsuperscript{122} Derrida, says Smith, ‘sketches a subject who is constituted by a relation to an exteriority – the alterity of the Other in the communal networks of signification’.\textsuperscript{123} But what kind of ‘exteriority’ and what kind of ‘alterity’ are in view here? The kind of room offered by deconstructionist thinking is insufficient to accommodate women in their search for identity.

Something is out of joint here. In the sense of offering to include ‘the other’ postmodernity is in sympathy with feminist demands. But the loss of guarantee for ‘truth’ and ‘meaning’ leaves a vacuum. The feminist desire for identity and subjectivity is, as Whitford indicates, somewhat at odds with the deconstructionist disowning of a source of meaning. In the deconstructionist approach, the motive of ‘hospitality’ might appear to accommodate women in their desire for identity but the method of ‘making room for the other’ appears to deprive them of the means of establishing themselves as an ‘other’.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{122} Smith, \textit{Jacques Derrida: Live Theory}, p. 15. \\
\end{flushright}
A postmodern response to Cartesian self-consciousness is perhaps not so much the abandonment of subjectivity as a loss of confidence in ‘truth’ and ‘meaning’ associated with it. One motive for this loss of confidence in ‘logocentrism’ is its alleged history of connection with ‘ethnocentrism’. In this regard, Smith writes, ‘one of the primary vocations of deconstruction is …the demythologisation of an account of pure presence, precisely because of the politics of such an ontology and epistemology.’

But if the attempt to correct the ethnocentrism of Cartesian self-consciousness is not accompanied by some other means of restoring meaningful epistemology and ontology, the willingness to offer hospitality may not be as beneficial as supposed.

To sum up a predicament with regard to identity: Cartesian self-consciousness, the source of the objective method of science, currently lacks the kind of epistemological ballast that was formerly supplied by what Steiner terms a ‘presence’. In McFague’s way of thinking the vacuum appears to be filled by human ideology. If the question centres round the nature of women’s identity, the method of thinking will tend to be circular: women’s identity will be constructed according to women’s ideology and the one will validate the other. As Irigaray says: women want to ‘create themselves’. Deconstructionist thinking seems to agree with feminism that human ideology is a key motive for philosophical endeavour but the kind of identity arising from deconstructionist thinking is less than helpful for women in terms of a sense of meaning and embodiment.

It is, however, Derrida himself who may point a way out of the impasse of subjectivity. Deconstructionist philosophy cannot be said to have a history of supporting the biblical God. Nevertheless, Smith reports about Derrida, that by ‘calling into question the linguistic ideal of immediacy and one (univocal) language … deconstruction has sided with Yahweh at Babel’. Smith quotes from Derrida, ‘Des Tours de Babel’:

In seeking to ‘make a name for themselves’, to found at the same time a universal tongue and a unique genealogy, the Semites want to bring the world to reason, and this reason can signify simultaneously a colonial violence (since they would thus universalise their idiom) and a peaceful transparency of the human community. Inversely, when God imposes and opposes his name, he ruptures the rational transparency but interrupts also the colonial violence of linguistic imperialism.

Deconstruction, it may be observed, sides with Yahweh to the extent that the critique is not directed against ‘the linguistic ideal of immediacy’ as such, since it is God who ‘imposes and opposes his name’ with the result that humanity disperses over the earth in forced implementation of the commandment of Genesis 1: 28. Rather the deconstructionist critique is directed against a specific kind of ‘linguistic ideal of immediacy’ connected with Cartesian self-consciousness, ‘the sphere of the knowing

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127 Smith, Jacques Derrida: Live Theory, pp. 51-52. Smith quotes Derrida, ‘Des Tours de Babel’ translated by Joseph F. Graham in The Derrida Reader, Peggy Kamuf (ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 253. Derrida’s essay appears again in Jacques Derrida, Acts of Religion, edited by Gil Anidjar (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), pp. 104-134. As I understand the essay, Smith’s statement that deconstruction has sided with Yahweh at Babel could also be phrased as Yahweh has sided with deconstruction at Babel. See p. 118: ‘in giving his name, God also appealed to translation, not only between the tongues that had suddenly become multiple and confused, but first of his name, of the name he had proclaimed, given, and which should be translated as confusion to be understood, hence to let it be understood that it is difficult to translate and so to understand … For Babel is untranslatable. God weeps over his name’. Derrida’s italics. Derrida regards this association of God’s name with confusion as disempowering correspondence between languages (see p. 117) and calls the Babel story ‘archetypal’ and ‘allegorical’ of the ‘so-called theoretical problems of translation’ (p. 111). He also appears to treat the story as a metaphor of deconstruction: ‘from abyss to abyss [the Babelian text] deconstructs the tower, and every turn, twists and turns of ever sort, in a rhythm’ (p. 133).
subject’ in which what is to be known is subject to the conditions of the knower. Making a name for oneself imposes conditions on the world. The Semites are said to want to universalise their idiom. In this sense subjectivity per se, even allegedly benevolent subjectivity as espoused by McFague, could be at risk of a deconstructionist critique.

For Derrida, however, there is poignancy in the imposition of God’s name: this is at once the supreme example of ‘the linguistic ideal of immediacy’ and the supreme example of the loss of ‘the linguistic ideal of immediacy’. God, on deconstructionist terms, imposes and opposes his name at the cost of Babel, which signifies confusion. In other words, God’s linguistic interference in imposing the meaning of ‘his name’ initiates the tragic necessity of translation in which pure transfer of meaning, including the meaning of God’s name, is forever out of reach. In my view, the twin poles of erstwhile purity of language and current messianic ‘trace’ haunt the deconstructionist conception in a Romantic trajectory. There is something Wagnerian in the picture of Yahweh as the hero who rises to the tragic heights of willing his own downfall. Whether this trajectory accords with the biblical writings is another matter. Derrida bases the association of God’s name with that of Babel on Voltaire’s statement that ‘Ba signifies father in the Oriental tongues, and Bel signifies God’. This can be compared with the statement by Derek Kidner that Babel ‘called itself Bab-ili or “gate of God”, but by a play of words Scripture

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129 Cf. Chapter 2, section B. See also Smith, Jacques Derrida: Live Theory, pp. 88-91; cf. p. 76.
superimposes the truer label bālal (“he confused”).\textsuperscript{132} Despite his persistent play on “confusion”, there is perhaps more confusion than Derrida admits in his premise of the supposed identification of God’s name with the name of Babel. But the tour de force style of his essay tends to preclude exegetical critique. What it does not preclude, admittedly figuratively, is interaction between Yahweh and creation.

Chapter 1 of this thesis noted Michel Foucault’s study of what McFague terms ‘linguistic sacramentalism’, a system that was abandoned due to the loss of faith in medieval cosmology. Deconstructionist interest in medieval linguistics seems to be couched in terms of a Romantic nostalgia for a linguistic system that lapsed with the onset of Cartesian subjectivity, a nostalgia evidenced perhaps in the Babel metaphor. In this regard, Derrida quotes Walter Benjamin who in turn quotes Mallarmé.

Benjamin, as cited by Derrida, writes:

Philosophy and translation are not futile … For there exists a philosophical genius, whose most proper characteristic is the nostalgia for that language which manifests itself in translation.\textsuperscript{133}

Benjamin, it may be observed, uses the term ‘nostalgia’. Derrida then goes on to quote from Benjamin’s citation of Mallarmé, the philosophical genius that Benjamin appears to have in mind. ‘The diversity of terrestrial idioms’, says Mallarmé, ‘prevents anyone from uttering words in which there would otherwise be a unique


mintage, itself materially the truth.'¹³⁴ There appears to be a Romantic quality of longing here for a truth which is at the same time tragically unobtainable.

But what if, on more prosaic terms, the unattainability of truth had been overstated by deconstructionists? Chapter 1 of this thesis suggested that linguistic sacramentalism *per se* is not necessarily dependent on medieval cosmology. If deconstruction demythologizes a Cartesian account of pure presence, is it possible to restore the ‘myth’ of a God who is recognized to ‘impose and oppose his name’, on terms at least as cogent as those of the old metaphysics? And, if not, what will happen? Derrida, says Smith, derives his mandate to make room for the other from a Jewish source, since hospitality is ‘the sum of the “Torah”’.¹³⁵ It is difficult to see how this mandate has any cogency without recourse to some external epistemological source. But, as noted above, Derrida replaces the old idea of cogency supplied by a metaphysic of ‘presence’ with a ‘quasi-ontology’ of the ‘trace’ (or presence-in-absence). Whatever hospitality may be offered sounds ethereal in such a context.

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¹³⁴ Derrida does not supply the original source for the quotation from Mallarmé which remained untranslated from the French in Benjamin’s work and is not translated (into English) by Joseph F. Graham, Derrida’s translator. The above is my attempt to render part of the quotation from Mallarmé, which reads poetically in French. (Here is the untranslated quotation in full: ‘Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême: penser étant écrire sans accessoires ni chuchotement, mais tacite encore l’immortelle parole, la diversité, sur terre, des idiomes empêche personne de proférer les mots qui, sinon, se trouveraient, par une frappe unique, elle même matériellement la vérité.’) The allusion to Babel seems obvious. For the allusion to truth in terms of the mintage of a coin, cf. Nietzsche’s statement about truth: ‘truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses, coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal.’ (See Friederich Nietzsche, ‘on Truth and Falsity in Their Ultramoral Sense’ (1873) in *Works 2*:180 cited in McFague, *Models of God*, pp. 5-6. Derrida also uses the image of the coin, likening metaphysicians to ‘knife-grinders, who instead of knives and scissors should put medals and coins to the grindstone to efface the exergue, the value and the head’. (See Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory*, p. 54.) Comparison of deconstructionist metaphors of the mintage or effacement of a coin and of Babel in terms of the impossibility of truth would seem worthwhile but cannot be attempted here.

If deconstruction offers hospitality in terms of an epistemological Babel, it is doubtful whether women will find it satisfactory. Quasi-ontology is of dubious benefit. As Whitford reports, Irigaray warns against an uncritical acceptance of postmodernism before the female side of the male/female binary has acceded to identity and subjectivity. But subjectivity is also of dubious benefit. Without access to external reality, everything, including a sense of identity, turns inwards. Against such deconstruction, is it possible that Yahweh could ‘impose and oppose his name’ and the One through whom the world was made offer identity for women?

What kind of philosophy and linguistic hospitality would be necessary to accommodate the external source of identity, known and experienced in the covenantal meeting-ground presupposed by the *imago Dei*? If what is known is subject to the conditions of the knower, exteriority is diminished if not excluded. Such a result appears to occur even when the subject is ‘the eternal sight of God’, as in Barth’s cosmology outlined above. But in Derrida’s reading of the Tower of Babel narrative, God does not view creation from a distance but rather interacts with creation and with language. If ‘logocentrism’ is defined as the colonial violence of linguistic imperialism, ‘logocentrism’ is critiqued as opposed to being other-centred. But the biblical Logos stands outside such subjectivist ‘logocentrism’. This thesis argues that human ontology *is* other-centred, patterned on the other-centred nature of divine ontology, which is its epistemological source.

**Conclusion**

The departure of the Unmoved Mover of pre-modern cosmology has seen the rise of a modernist notion of objectivity, excluding direct reference to divinity from the
scientific method. But, according to Steiner, the linguistic gods of ‘presence’ only began to be banished at a later date. Full exclusion of linguistic ‘presence’ would exclude the scientific method, with doubt about access to external reality and the cogency of language about it. Insofar as it depends on science, the ‘evolutionary’ story that governs the modernist worldview (but does not explain existence according to Bultmann)\textsuperscript{136} is also dependent on a prior sense of meaning derived through a metaphysic of ‘presence’. The deconstructionist critique, however ‘evolutionary’ its expression, leads in the direction of a loss of meaning including a loss of a source of identity.

In this context McFague presents an ‘ecological’ model of the self in relation to the world. \textit{Within} the model, the human subject interacts with nature which in turn influences the sense of self at the deepest level. Such interaction is said to endow nature with subject-hood or spirituality while nature, seen in this light, encourages the subject to view the world with a ‘loving’ eye. \textit{Within} the model, McFague attempts to merge ‘science’ and ‘religion’ in the notion of a ‘panentheistic’ God but her way of thinking does not allow for a clear correspondence to the external world. The method appears to lack a source of epistemology beyond subjectivist assertion in which linguistic ‘presence’ is disowned. This is what I call ‘a frame of non-reference’ in terms of external reality and ‘a frame of self-reference’ in terms of epistemology. Keller adopts a similar method with an intent centred on establishing identity for women. But identity on such a premise appears fragile and fragmented.

Section A of this chapter suggested that for feminism the critique of the Enlightenment inheritance is not so much a critique of subjectivity as a demand for subjectivity and identity for women. The thrust of subjectivity follows a rationalist subject-object orientation stemming from the Enlightenment. But, as demonstrated by McFague’s subject-subjects model, a search for identity follows the pattern of sub-rational imaginative projection. This pattern is evident in the ‘ecstatic’ letters of French poet Arthur Rimbaud, whom Steiner classes as an early deconstructionist thinker. In broad terms it can be said that such a search for women’s identity encompasses both the rationalist and Romantic strands of the Enlightenment legacy and that both are developed within a subjectivist epistemological framework. By contrast, this thesis proposes an epistemology based on the covenantal activity of the Wisdom of God. This kind of epistemology entails a shift away from the assumptions not only of key feminist writers, but also of the Enlightenment inheritance and even of pre-modern thinking.

McFague writes that the Incarnation lacks the credibility in our time that it would have had in first century Mediterranean times and the Middle Ages. She is mistaken, however, in thinking that the Incarnation was compatible with the pre-modern worldview. C. S. Lewis notes ‘the Platonic view that the Divine and the human cannot meet except through a tertium quid’. But Christ is not an ‘intermediate being’ in a Platonic sense, as Barth points out. The earlier view, says Barth, recognized the notion of a second divine being assisting in the work of creation. What it did not recognize was the possibility of such a divine being

If the Word becomes flesh, the transcendent epistemological source is understood to become embodied reality. But this understanding is compatible neither with the concept of a God in natural processes nor with the concept of a Platonic cosmos. Arguments against an Unmoved Mover are not arguments against the God of the biblical writings. Neither are they arguments in favour of the biblical God. Some more radical break with the Enlightenment would be needed to accord with the biblical tradition of God’s interaction with the world.

McFague’s attempt to ‘make sense’ of Christianity and postmodern science does not appear helpful in this regard. On her own showing, her attempt to recover linguistic and epistemological cogency can only supply a ‘coherent’ cosmology and ‘embodied’ identity within the model. Such models, said to be ‘mostly fiction’, are nevertheless ‘projected onto’ an alleged history of the cosmos. The aim of such projection is soteriological and includes the emancipation of women. The method, however, resembles that of subject-object imposition. The ideological thrust of McFague’s models, their tentative nature notwithstanding, may serve to illustrate a problem of deconstruction. A deconstructionist climate of thinking, in its soteriological function, would critique a subjectivist epistemological framework on the grounds that its ‘logocentric’ character is ‘ethnocentric’. But the critique itself, while rarefying the subjectivist epistemological framework, would still operate within it. By contrast, Derrida’s portrayal of a God who can interact with creation at Babel may unwittingly supply the germ of an alternative way of thinking and offer a way

140 McFague, Models of God, pp. xi-xii.
forward to recovering identity for women in a sense that is coherent and anchored in external reality.

This thesis argues for the possibility of sacramental identity in which identity is received by means of a covenant between God and humanity. The pattern of gendered identity seen to occur in the *imago Dei* presupposes that the Wisdom of God becomes flesh as Jesus of Nazareth. In New Testament terms, if Jesus is not seen as Wisdom incarnate there is no clear antitype at the divine level for women’s gendered identity. The Incarnation is covenantal activity *par excellence*. Without such a possibility, sacramental identity is also placed in doubt. Put positively, this is significant for women’s identity in two senses: not only are women made in the image of the Wisdom of God but the covenantal activity of the Wisdom of God also underpins the possibility of sacramental identity. Given this understanding, women’s identity is ‘lived in’ and embodied, contingent on divine mystery. The effect to the contrary of the method espoused by key feminist writers will be considered further in the next chapter.