Chapter 6
Identity and the cosmos

Introduction

Chapter 5 outlined a method of establishing identity that is by nature self-referential. This is a response to what I have termed ‘a frame of non-reference’: if there is no access to externals (including God) there is no means of receiving validation from outside the self either. In this context key feminist writers have suggested that meaning for women can be found in various constructed cosmologies. In these views the cosmos is said to be in some way associated with divinity. In this chapter I examine cosmologies mooted by Catherine Keller, Elizabeth A. Johnson and Sallie McFague. I argue that these cosmologies are an expression of what McFague terms ‘imaginative construal of the God-world relationship’\(^1\) and that the kind of identity received from them does not satisfy a search for meaning. To a degree McFague recognizes this, suggesting that further inspiration can be found in Francis of Assisi’s approach to nature. But St. Francis himself did not subscribe to ‘a frame of non-reference’ nor did he try to find his identity from nature. The ‘quasi-ontology’ arising from ‘a frame of non-reference’ cannot borrow from a frame of reference which it denies, although it may attempt to do so.

The previous chapter considered a dilemma for feminists who share the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment while receiving their emancipist thrust from the Enlightenment. The emancipist thrust is a source of motivation for the search for identity, while subjectivist thinking, also stemming from the Enlightenment, is a feminist source for establishing identity for women. But the postmodern critique of

subjectivity undermines this method of establishing identity. In one sense feminists can be said to be fighting a rearguard action against post-modernity. But at the same time the exigency of the postmodern ‘frame of non-reference’ takes its toll on the emancipist thrust. Margaret Whitford refers to this conflict in the works of Luce Irigaray as the ‘enactment of the tension’:

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 … In its enactment of the tension, [Irigaray’s work] does not provide answers; it rather appeals to the reader to begin to invent the next step(s).^2

A response to the tension between a desire for identity and a critique of the method for establishing it is to pass the dilemma on to the reader. Identity is not a given. It must be invented.

The hiatus between a desire for identity and denial of external reference to supply it leads to some strange results. Women’s search for meaning becomes a substitute for an actual sense of identity. Irigaray demonstrates a positive view of what might be called ‘delayed ontology’: a realisation of women’s identity in the undefined future. She writes:

Something of the consummation of sexual difference has still not been articulated or transmitted. Is there not something still held in reserve within the silence of female history: an energy, morphology, growth or blossoming still to come from the female realm? Such a flowering keeps the future open. The world remains uncertain in the fact of this strange advent. ^3

The advent envisaged by Irigaray will not be achieved without some intentional activity on the part of women. As noted in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Irigaray asserts:

---


^3 See Luce Irigaray, ‘Sexual Difference’ in The Irigaray Reader, p. 176.
[Women] want to seize that which already exists so as to bring it back to an invisible source – their source? – a place from whence they might create, create themselves \textit{ex nihilo}? Has not history forced this impossibility upon them? They must continue to live, cut off from their beginning and from their end.$^4$

Delayed ontology or identity in the making requires firstly a fervour for self-creation \textit{`ex nihilo’} and secondly a recognition of the need for a new history for women with a new beginning and a new end. Chapter 1 noted that the place of women’s self-creation is a female history traced through the ‘matriarchal’ line (as opposed to a ‘patriarchal’ line discerned in the biblical writings). Such a matriarchal line is credited with a divine dimension. This approach allows for a beginning (the matriarchal genealogy) and an end (the ideal derived from the ‘divine dimension’ within the matriarchal line).$^5$ I argue that this process presupposes a prior source of meaning coming from an emancipatory desire to create a history. Such a history will then offer an additional constructed sense of meaning.

Various conflicts underlie the quest for meaning. A feminist search for validation is also a search for embodiment but a postmodern philosophical environment is not congenial to either. Despite, or perhaps because of, what Whitford calls the enactment of the tension, the emphasis is on resolving what are seen as historical ‘dualisms’. At the same time the modernist thrust for feminist subjectivity posits a polar opposite to masculine subjectivity. Identity draws content from a feminist perspective on God and the world. But the starting-point of human subjectivity as epistemological source does not sit easily with the concept of humanity created in God’s image.

---


$^5$ \textit{The Irigaray Reader}, p.159.
This chapter appraises a quest for identity and embodiment, said to be received through connection with the natural world. Section A describes various perceived dichotomies and assesses a proposed feminized creation history in which a sense of meaning is alleged to emerge via ‘panentheistic’ divine operation. Section B considers a search for embodiment linked with a possible projection of sub-rational archetypal motifs. Section C explores McFague’s proposal of ‘Nature which is’ as a term for God. Section D contrasts views of St. Francis of Assisi presented by McFague and G. K. Chesterton.

In the conclusion to Women, Earth and Creator Spirit, Elizabeth A. Johnson writes:

In this lecture I have sought a new vision of the Creator Spirit enfolding and unfolding a reconciled human community and a healed, living earth … The precise point has been to overcome sexual disparagement of the female in the three basic relationships of human beings among each other, with the earth, and with God’

Overcoming sexual disparagement of the female is one thing. Positive identity for women is another. In the proposals outlined below, identity is perhaps not so much passively received as actively invented. It is, as Irigaray suggests, for the reader to invent the next steps or perhaps a new history.

A. Escape from dualism?

A new history for women is given some content by Catherine Keller. She finds a beginning in the ‘tehom’ of Genesis 1:2, endorsing Irigaray’s assertion that women are cut off from this ‘feminized’ beginning: ‘But let us say that in the beginning was the end of her story, and that from now on she will have one dictated to her: by the man-father’. Keller goes on to suggest a method for creating a new story for women: ‘what if we

---

6 Johnson, Women, Earth and Creator Spirit, p. 68.
[women] begin to read the Word from [a different] vantage point?’ It is the intention to read differently, implied by the feminist ‘we’, that is the prior source of meaning before the new story is created. The story itself is unashamedly a construal in which the reader is invited to take part.

Keller associates the beginning of the new feminized story with a medieval cabbalist reading of Genesis 1:1 in which Elohim is said to be the locus for creation rather than primary creator:

With the Beginning
The Concealed One who is not known created the palace.
This palace is called Elohim.
The secret is:
‘With Beginning, created Elohim.’

In this rendering of Genesis 1:1, the gap in the text operates as subject, while the object is ‘Elohim’, said to be ‘the palace’ or place made by the unspecified creator.

Keller writes:

Please read the above blank. The subject of creation has been deliberately deleted. Or rather, the kabbalist has pried open a fissure left by the grammar of bereshit, exploiting the Hebrew placement of the verb bara before Elohim, its ostensible subject. So Moses de Leon changes the subject. Elohim has been rewritten as the object rather than the subject of the act of creation! Nothing fills the gap: it gapes, unspeakably, ungrammatically. Centuries before the deconstruction of ‘the subject’, the western hypersubject, the subject of subjects, quietly drops out. There is no innocence of intention here … Elohim now signifies a created place, a palace (= binah, womb) – not ‘the Creator’.

---


Two things accompany what Keller presents as the disappearance of the ‘western hypersubject’: firstly there is a blank in the manuscript instead of a creator and secondly attention is focussed on the locus of creation rather than on the (unknown) creator. Keller states that in this medieval Jewish reading the primeval space or womb is linked with the Divine Mother: ‘Created being has its source in Her; She is called “the totality of all individuation” and “the world that is coming”, constantly coming and flowing’. For Keller, the source is identified as the ‘deep’ of Genesis 1:2, the place or womb for an evolving creation.

Keller dissociates her presentation of the creation story \textit{ex profundis} from the classic tradition of creation \textit{ex nihilo}. But, in appealing to the Jewish cabbalist tradition, her presentation of the creation story is more profoundly \textit{ex nihilo} than that of the classical Christian tradition. The motif of \textit{nihil} predominates. The creator is by intention an unspecified blank or absence and no detail is supplied about how \textit{Elohim}, the locus of subsequent creation, is made.

The mystical blank affirms Keller’s notion of ambiguity as primary source. \textit{Elohim}, feminized as the primeval womb or \textit{tehom}, is potentially many-voiced and open-ended. It is not, according to Keller, \textit{Elohim per se} but the \textit{voice} of \textit{Elohim} who dictates an arbitrary and masculinized order, cutting access to the feminized prior source. She proposes a reinstatement of the primary (feminized) ambiguity, arguing at the same time that the search for meaning is not impeded by the restoration of indeterminacy as the beginning of the story. Despite the many potential voices,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Keller, \textit{Face of the Deep}, p. 179. Keller cites \textit{Zohar}, p. 34. This is a quotation from the ‘Introduction’ to \textit{Zohar}. Keller also cites p. 210. The reference is to the notes on the \textit{Zohar} in which \textit{Elohim} is defined: “a divine name meaning “God” or “gods”. Here the name signifies \textit{Binah}, the Divine Mother who gives birth to the seven lower sefirot”.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Keller maintains that some sort of order emerges on the windy surface of primeval chaos.

Keller claims to find support for primeval ambiguity in the early writing of Augustine of Hippo:

[W]e are exploring – with a less orthodox sort of support from Augustine – the possibility that *this theologically originary indeterminacy generates order not in opposition to but upon the face of the chaos*. That face expresses an infinite interrelationality that at once negates and proliferates metaphors of finite personality. Having gone so far as to theologize the indeterminate, why retreat into a tidy neo-classicism – as though only an unchanging order can save us from a chaotic *nihil* of meaning? The text of the *Confessions*, so much more attractive, more permeable than all the orthodoxies it inspires, reads as an ancient estuary bubbling with a still suppressed potentiality. Here we may with Augustine … take delight in the surface; indeed, in its billowing multiplicity.\(^{11}\)

But this is to misrepresent Augustine who does *not* theologize the indeterminate. Keller alludes to a passage in which Augustine muses on a spiritual application of Genesis 1:

There are truths that are fixed and defined and are not enlarged by further evolution. Such are the lights of wisdom and knowledge. But the workings of these same truths in the material order are numerous and varied. They multiply and grow, one giving birth to another, and this happens because you, O God, bless their reproduction. For you compensate for the ease with which our mortal senses tire by providing that a single truth may be illustrated and represented to our minds in many ways by bodily means. These are the moving creatures, the signs and sacraments that the waters brought forth. But they gave them birth in your Word.\(^{12}\)

Augustine begins not with indeterminacy but with ‘fixed and defined truths’. The numerous applications of truth are the *signs* and *sacraments* of the fixed truths of the heavenly realm. In Augustine’s analogy, ‘the waters’ (of Genesis 1) have given birth to these varied applications of eternal truths. But, as Augustine makes clear, ‘they gave them birth in [God’s] Word’. The Word is the means of ‘inter-relationality’.

---


To sum up at this point, Irigaray’s search for meaning for women takes women back to an invisible source from which to create themselves *ex nihilo*. In this regard, Keller’s cites a blank space that creates a place of primeval feminized indeterminacy through which meaning is said to emerge. She opposes the classic doctrine of *ex nihilo*, not because she objects to the notion of creation from nothing but because the classic doctrine is said to exclude the feminist voice. By contrast the proposed many-voiced primal indeterminacy purports to be more democratic. But, in fact, if primal indeterminacy is associated with the womb, it privileges a feminist hearing. What ‘tehomic theology’ does not hear is the biblical tradition of Wisdom being with ‘the Lord’ *before* the world was made (Proverbs 8:22-31, cf. John 17:5). Nor does it hear a biblical and patristic tradition that Wisdom and the Word are one and the same, the One *through whom* the world was made, though it might be supposed that this would be a promising avenue for feminist enquiry.

In the case presented by Keller the classic creation story is allegedly misogynist, not so much in being presented as *ex nihilo* as in being mediated through the masculinized Word that is said to deny access to the prior feminized *tehom*. Theology based on the Word is seen as dominating and single-voiced. Theology based on the *tehom* is seen as more democratic in being potentially many voiced. But there is a further contributing factor to the rift between the two theologies: the contrast between an *immaterial* Creator and the *tehom* as *material* first cause.

---

In describing a response by Irenaeus to a Gnostic creation story, Keller writes that for Irenaeus, ‘Matter must come from the immaterial Creator, not from an erotic, maternal matrix already vaguely embodied’. Keller comments: ‘It is by defeminizing and decorporealizing the activity of creation that [Irenaeus] can articulate the full logic of the doctrine [of ex nihilo]’. She quotes Irenaeus:

While men, indeed, cannot make anything out of nothing, but only out of matter already existing, yet God is at this point pre-eminently superior to men, that He Himself called into being the substance of His creation, when previously it had no existence. Keller concludes that ‘what is at stake in the doctrine now becomes explicit’:

He, who is God above all, formed by His word, in His own territory, as He Himself pleased, the various and diversified works of creation inasmuch as He is the former of all things, like a wise architect and most powerful monarch.

The lines are drawn. The immaterial Creator is seen as masculine and dominant. By contrast a material matrix for creation is seen as feminized and democratic. Keller describes the two theologies as ‘tehomophobic’ and ‘tehomophilic’ respectively. In search of support for a creation story with a material locus, Keller once again enlists her perception of Confessions. She cites what she terms ‘Augustine’s most tehomophilic trope, that of the cosmic sponge’. She quotes from Confessions:

I pictured you, O Lord, as encompassing this mass on all sides and penetrating every part, yet yourself infinite in every dimension. It was as though there were sea everywhere, nothing but an immense, an infinite sea, and somewhere within it a sponge, as large as might be but not infinite, filled through and through with the water of this boundless sea. In some such way as this I imagined that your creation, which was finite, was filled by you, who were infinite.

---

Keller comments: ‘In its incomprehensible immensity, its still finite quality radiating in all directions, this universe is saturated with divinity’. Keller admits that this picture of creator and creation does not persist in Confessions: ‘To be sure, this imaginary of divine immanence subsides in Augustine’s thought. (Indeed … he launches into … perplexity about theodicy: how if God is everywhere is there space for anything but goodness?) Yet within this God-soaked topos of creation,’ she adds, ‘the deity flows freely.’  

What Keller does not make clear is the very different understanding of the relationship between creator and creation described in Confessions after Augustine abandons the sponge image:

[With the eye of my soul … I saw the Light that never changes … it was not the common light of day … nor was it some more spacious light of the same sort, as if the light of day were to shine far, far brighter than it does and fill all space with a vast brilliance. What I saw was something quite, quite different from any light we know on earth … I asked myself, ‘Is truth then nothing at all, simply because it has no extension in space, with or without limits?’ And, far off, I heard your voice saying, I am the God who IS … Also I considered all the other things that are of a lower order than yourself, and I saw that they have not absolute being in themselves, nor are they entirely without being. They are real in so far as they have their being from you, but unreal in the sense that they are not what you are.]

In this passage Augustine posits the image of a more spacious light than daylight filling the space of creation with brilliance rather than that of a divine sea infusing the sponge of creation but the point is the same. Significantly, Augustine rejects the sponge image (as noted in Chapter 1). God is not in any sense of the same substance as the created world.  

Yet the created world is intimately connected with God in being totally dependent upon

---

21 Augustine, Confessions, VII, 10, 11.  
22 Cf. Confessions, VII, 1. Augustine returns to his earlier theory of the relation of God to the world more than once in Book VII. In VII,1 he writes: ‘I thought of you … O Life of my life, as a great being with dimensions extending everywhere … I imagined that you were able to pass through material bodies … and that you could penetrate to all their parts … so that they were filled with your presence … But it was a false theory’.  

249
God: ‘[a]s for me, I know no other content but clinging to God, because unless my being remains in him, it cannot remain in me.’

The sponge image is described in *Confessions* only to be disowned by Augustine in terms reminiscent of Irenaeus. But Keller is not the only writer who seems to want to revive it. Rejecting classical theism as ‘isolationist and dualist’ and pantheism as a ‘suffocating deception’ that encourages women to ‘submerge themselves in the “all” of a man or a family or institution’, Elizabeth A. Johnson describes a ‘panentheistic’ God as congenial to a feminist ideal:

If theism weights the scales in the direction of divine transcendence and pantheism overmuch in the direction of immanence, panentheism attempts to hold onto both in full strength. Divine transcendence is a wholeness that includes all parts, embracing the world rather than excluding it, as the etymology of panentheism, ‘all-in-God’ suggests, while divine immanence is given as the world’s inmost dynamism and goal . . . This fundamental vision of mutual coinherence in which Holy Wisdom is present throughout the universe while everything is embraced in her inclusive freedom and compassionate love is highly compatible with feminist values . . . [Holy Wisdom] is like the boundless sea encompassing a tiny island.

A boundless sea encompassing a tiny island closely resembles the sponge image described by Augustine.

The cosmological model described by Keller was considered and rejected by classical Christianity. Augustine admits that at one stage of his spiritual journey he

---

25 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *SHE WHO IS*, pp. 231-232. See below in the next section of this chapter for Johnson’s apparent understanding of Wisdom. Cf. also Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, pp. 37-43. Johnson writes: ‘Matter, alive with energy, evolves to spirit … Distinct from classical theism … and also … pantheism, panentheism, holds that the universe, both matter and spirit, is encompassed by the Matrix of the living God in an encircling that generates freedom, self-transcendence, and the future, all in the context of the interconnected whole’. Johnson refers to this perception of ‘the interconnected whole’ as ‘the kinship model’. But unlike McFague’s more tentative models, she describes ‘the kinship model of humankind’s relation to the world’ as ‘the basic truth’.
could not overcome the thought that God was ‘some kind of bodily substance extended in space, either permeating the world or diffused in infinity beyond it’. Augustine describes how he changed his mind when he heard God’s voice ‘calling from on high, saying, ‘I am the food of full-grown men. Grow and you shall feed on me. But you shall not change me into your own substance, as you do with the food of your body. Instead you shall be changed into me.’ The difficulty with panentheism is anticipated by Augustine: God is reduced to the material. In fact, panentheism is too close to pantheism for comfort and is open to the same objections. At the same time classical Christianity is not as totally ‘isolationist and dualist’ as Johnson would claim. God is not reduced to human substance but humanity can be changed into divine substance.

Johnson claims that her model ‘safeguards the radical distinction between God and the world while also promoting their mutual if asymmetrical relationship’. What she does not recognize is that her cosmological model makes no provision for the relationship between God and the world to become less asymmetrical. Similarly, in the feminized creation story presented by Keller, the universe may be saturated with divinity but there is no sense that ‘the creation will ever be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God’ (Romans 8:21). The promise of a new liberty for creation is explored further in Section D below.

---

26 Augustine, Confessions, VII, 1.
27 Augustine, Confessions, VII, 1.
28 Elizabeth A. Johnson, SHE WHO IS, p.231.
29 Cf. Johnson, Women, Earth and Creator Spirit, pp. 59-60. Johnson omits the current bondage to decay of Romans 8:21 when she cites Romans 8:22-23 (‘When creation groans in labour pains and we do too … the Spirit is in the groaning and in the midwifing …’). A theology of the Creator Spirit, according to Johnson, leads to ‘realization of the sacredness’ (rather than bondage) of the earth.
Both Keller and Johnson are motivated by a desire to overcome dualism but their success in this regard may be questioned. Keller writes:

According to the logic of *ex nihilo*, one is either good or evil, corporeal or incorporeal, eternal or temporal, almighty or powerless, propertied or inferior. One need not argue that this grid of dualisms necessarily accompanies the *ex nihilo* argument – only that historically it has done so.\(^3\)

But far from overcoming dualism, Keller’s distinction between ‘tehomophilic’ and ‘tehomophobic’ would appear to add another dimension to it.

There is a further difficulty about this kind of thinking. Paul S. Fiddes writes about Sallie McFague’s model: ‘God as spirit and body, or the embodied spirit of the universe is a metaphor for the final reality of God which remains totally hidden’.\(^3\) He comments that there is no dualism of spirit and body *within* the metaphor. And yet there is a dualism between the God of the metaphor and the unknown God. Grace Jantzen, says Fiddes, ‘rightly objects that this is just another form of dualism’.\(^3\) He continues that Jantzen, while driven by similar motivations to McFague, proposes a third model of the world-as-God’s body which she calls ‘pantheism’. For Jantzen, according to Fiddes, God is not reducible to physiological processes but is related to them as we humans are related to our bodies as persons.

The sense of a creator who operates as a powerful (and apparently unapproachable) monarch contrasts with a feminist search for a first cause perceived as less remote. It should be noted that the creator that Johnson describes as ‘isolationist’ and ‘dualist’ may in fact owe more to the Unmoved Mover of medieval academia than to the God

---

\(^3\) Keller, *Face of the Deep*, p. 49.
of classical Christianity. Be that as it may, there would appear to be other dualisms in the various alternative proposals outlined above. Not least of these, I would add, is that between the model-maker and the model.

B. The search for embodiment

‘Feminist theologians such as Mc Fague’, says Fiddes, ‘diagnose a … “deep sickness” in our culture, which is an inability to love the body of the earth and a corresponding hatred of our own bodies’. One may agree with this diagnosis and yet question the proposed remedy. Fiddes writes:

Sallie McFague … considers the universe to be the body of God in the sense that all bodies are God’s body… It is important to understand why McFague insists on beginning with the whole cosmos, and not with the particular body of Christ … She worries that beginning with the particular will result in the imposing of one kind of body as the measure and standard of all – namely the male human body.

While sympathetic to McFague’s motive, Fiddes comments that this approach ‘reflects a modern discomfort with the particularity of divine action or incarnation’.

Elizabeth A. Johnson demonstrates a similar method to McFague. She writes:

Articulated within a religious perspective, the kinship stance knows that we humans are interrelated parts and products of a world that is continually being made and nurtured by the Creator Spirit … Even as a species we are not separate and isolated, but in all our uniqueness, as Sallie McFague so eloquently writes: We belong from the cells of our bodies to the finest creations of our minds, to the intricate, constantly changing cosmos.

Such a method impinges on her attitude to the particular body of Christ:

---

33 Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 280.
34 Fiddes, Participating in God, p.286.
35 Fiddes, Participating in God, p. 289.
If the model for sharing in the image of Christ be one of exact duplication … and if Christ be reduced to the historical individual Jesus of Nazareth, and if the salient feature about Jesus as the Christ be his male sex, then women are obviously excluded from sharing that image in full… [But the] guiding model for the *imago Christi* is not replication of sexual features but participation in the life of Christ… Furthermore, the whole Christ is a corporate personality, a relational reality, redeemed humanity… Christ exists only pneumatologically. Finally, what is essential to the saving good news about Jesus is not his bodily sex but the solidarity of the Wisdom of God in and through this genuine human being with all those who suffer and are lost. To make of the maleness of Jesus Christ a Christological principle is to deny the universality of salvation.37

Fiddes, on the other hand, states that salvation depends on the particular:

> So when we say ‘Amen’ to the Father as we meet God in all creation, we are leaning on the particular human response of Jesus, the Jesus of the wilderness beyond Jordan, of Gethsemane and Golgotha, interweaving inseparably with the ecstatic response of eternal sonship. Meeting God through bodies, we are always dependent upon the particular body of Christ.38

Johnson’s quest for embodiment does not, in Fiddes’ sense, lean on the particular. It seems ironic that a diagnosis of a need to love physical bodies should be addressed by a way of thinking that illustrates discomfort with the particular. One might add that a de-literalizing of the biblical narrative must surely cause a *loss* of embodiment. By contrast, Fiddes observes: ‘If the [Christ-event] which has all the contingency of time and space, of the dusty roads of Galilee, the sweat of crowds and the blood of executions, is normative for the embodiment of God, then we can never escape the particular.’39

Fiddes’ method runs counter to that of Johnson’s ‘religious perspective’. Johnson does not begin with the ‘contingency of time and space’. Rather, she begins with

---

37 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *SHE WHO IS*, pp. 72-73. One could ask how the symbolism of bridegroom and bride would operate, as in Revelation 21: 2-3, if the whole Christ is redeemed humanity and what is meant by the resurrection of the body if Christ exists only pneumatologically.

38 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 289.

feminist ideological concerns and moves to what she terms ‘the kinship stance’ with
the cosmos. Her idea of God derives from this process:

Feminist thinking prizes dialectical connectedness that flourishes in a circle of
mutuality. This has obvious implications for the idea of God. If relation is at
the heart of the universe, if mutuality is a moral excellence, then the deity of
God does not consist in being over against and superior to, but expresses itself
in freely drawing near and being connected in mutual relation. This … is
precisely the way the Creator Spirit is present and active in the world.\textsuperscript{40}

Such an \textit{idea} of God is continuous with an \textit{idea} of self in relation with the world.
Johnson adds: ‘In the realm of theory, if the self is not defined by opposition but by
the dialectic of friendly constitutive relation, then it becomes possible to reconcile all
manner of previously dichotomous elements’. But, as argued in the previous chapter,
such emphasis on the idea or way of thinking tends to place a framework of distance
between the external subject who conceives the idea and the content of the idea. In
fact, it forces ‘dichotomous elements’. This colours the kind of relations between
God, self and world. Such relationships cannot be direct except as they occur within
the model. Such relationships are part of an idea, and in that sense abstract rather than
embodied.

Johnson applies her method of defining the self to a quest for identity for women in
relation to the cosmos. In this regard, she draws attention to a selection of cosmic and
female symbols for the Spirit:

\begin{quote}
How shall we speak of the Creator Spirit? If we search the scriptures with our
major thesis in mind, we shall find a small collection of cosmic and female
symbols of the Spirit, most of which are marginalized by a patriarchal
imagination. Remembering these texts can give us the beginnings of a
vocabulary for an ecological ethic and spirituality.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{40} Johnson, \textit{Women, Earth and Creator Spirit}, p. 27
\textsuperscript{41} Johnson, \textit{Women, Earth and Creator Spirit}, p. 44.
Johnson includes ‘Woman Wisdom’ of the biblical wisdom literature as ‘women’s reality … thought suitable to image the Spirit’ by ‘the religious patriarchal tradition’.\textsuperscript{42} This illustrates to me how far Johnson’s thinking moves away from a God of relationships. If ‘Woman Wisdom’ is said to owe her existence to the patriarchal imagination, it can be observed that this is to say a good deal less than Augustine would claim for Wisdom. One might ask what relevance female symbols would have to the \textit{imago Dei} if all description of God is a product of the imagination, patriarchal or otherwise. But, as observed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Johnson’s SHE WHO IS would seem a shadowy projection rather than a concrete reality.

As noted in Chapter 1, Johnson states that ‘women’s religious experience’ is ‘a generating force’ for symbols for the divine. She writes:

\begin{quote}
Women realize that they participate in the image of the divine and so their own concrete reality can point toward this mystery … Women’s religious experience is a generating force for these symbols, a clear instance of how great symbols of the divine always come into being not simply as a projection of the imagination, but as an awakening from the deep abyss of human existence in real encounter with divine being.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

Johnson begins from what women are said to consciously realize but she does not stay there. Johnson appears to derive identity for women from a \textit{deeper level of consciousness} that becomes a projection of the imagination as a ‘symbol’ for the ‘divine’. She writes that such symbols ‘cannot be produced intentionally but grow from a deep level that Tillich identifies as the collective unconscious’.\textsuperscript{44}

The previous chapter drew attention to the nineteenth century French poet, Arthur Rimbaud, whom Steiner identifies as a forerunner of deconstructionist thinking.

\textsuperscript{42} Johnson, \textit{Women, Earth and Creator Spirit}, p. 51 f.
\textsuperscript{43} Johnson, \textit{SHE WHO IS}, pp. 46-47.
Rimbaud is noted for finding a source of identity through the inner self. Steiner goes so far as to say that the poet ‘posits at the now vacant heart of consciousness the splintered images of other and momentary “selves”’. It was through such ‘selves’ that the poet sought an enriched experience of reality in all its complexity. Unlike Johnson, Rimbaud revolted against society and the church. Nevertheless, I argue that there is a similarity of method in Johnson’s awakening from the deep abyss of human existence in real encounter with divine being. It is through the sub-rational imagination that ‘great symbols for the divine’ are produced. For Johnson, imagination stops short at these great symbols and is not carried to a reality beyond them. The encounter with the divine does not occur in the external world but in the inner self. As such, it bears symptoms of a deconstructionist denial of access to external reality.

Johnson goes so far as to identify experience of ‘self’ with the experience of God and the *imago Dei*:

> Women’s experience of self interpreted as experience of God, fleshed out with values characteristic of women’s ways of being in the world, comes to a theological flashpoint when women begin to articulate and act in accord with their dignity as *imago Dei, imago Christi*.

In this method of discerning what it means to be *imago Dei*, an apparently deep-seated encounter is ‘fleshed out’ in order to become a ‘symbol’ of the divine. Chapter 2 of this thesis argued that this method operates in reverse of the *imago Dei*. Here I add that the fact that the subliminal encounter needs to be fleshed out in order to become a ‘symbol’ would indicate how fragile the basis is for a sense of identity.

---

46 ‘Introduction’ to *Twelve French Poets*, p. lv.

> The figure of the dove in the gospels and in Christian art … links the Holy Spirit with the broad pre-Christian tradition of divine female power: ‘Iconographically the dove is a messenger of the goddess [Aphrodite] and of the Holy Spirit.’

Erich Neumann sums up this Jungian kind of thinking:

> The stages of the self-revelation of the Feminine Self, objectivized in the world of archetypes, symbols, images and rites, present us with a world that may be said to be both historical and eternal. The ascending realms of symbols in which the Feminine with its elementary and transformative character becomes visible as Great Round, as Lady of the Plants and Animals, and finally as genetrix of the spirit, as nurturing Sophia, correspond to stages in the self-unfolding of the feminine nature … But these manifestations of the Archetypal Feminine in all times and all cultures … appear also in the living reality of the modern woman, in her dreams and visions, compulsions and fantasies, projections and relationships, fixations and transformations.

Jung makes a distinction between metaphysics in the old objective sense and what Neumann calls the ‘living reality’ of the modern woman. There is a difference between the ancient belief in something external and what Jung calls ‘a rebirth of the Platonic spirit’ working in the subconscious mind. It is to such a metaphysic of the inner self that Johnson, apparently, appeals to. As noted in Chapter 5, Rimbaud interpreted his exploration of the sub-rational self in terms of a quest for a harmony of mind and body unknown since the Greeks. Johnson hopes to achieve a similar harmony. She states that ‘[a] theology of the Creator Spirit overcomes the dualism of spirit and matter’. But how would this kind of theology interpret ‘compulsions and

---

52 ‘Introduction’ to *Twelve French Poets*, p. iv.
fantasies’ in terms of experience of God? What kind of harmony of spirit and matter will be found in the ‘fixations and transformations’ of the inner self?

This section and the previous one have considered a search for women’s identity through an alleged relationship between women, God and the world. I suggest that the result is disembodied and does not avoid dualism. Chapter 5 argued that feminist ideology relies on the epistemology of the Cartesian legacy. But it is the Cartesian legacy in a feminist guise. The God of an external metaphysic of ‘presence’ is sidelined as ‘male’ and oppressive, leaving the female subject as the key player in the quest for identity. Such reliance on Cartesian thinking does not in itself overcome the soul-body division of Enlightenment. Further, without an external source of ‘presence’, such thinking must look elsewhere for cogency. In Johnson’s proposals considered above some form of cogency would appear to come through Jungian symbolic motifs in the subconscious mind. In consequence, there are two potential sources of epistemology, stemming from the Cartesian and the Jungian legacies. If there is a link between the rational and the sub-rational legacies, it is found in the ideologically inspired projection of the imagination which relies on both. But a projection of the imagination does not link the female subject with the external world. Thus dualism is overcome, if at all, at the expense of embodiment.

Chapter 3 noted Grace Jantzen’s discernment of a necessary association between pantheism and a female projection of a divine horizon, in order to distinguish such a ‘symbolic’ from that of the ‘disembodied Father God … thought of in male terms’. The idea of a necessary symbolical projection, detached from reference to anything

---

54 See Jantzen, Becoming divine, p. 269.
else except to the ideology that gave it birth, would seem to accord with what Ricoeur refers to as the peril of ‘rationalizing symbols as such’. Concept and symbol are brought together in terms of what he calls ‘dogmatic mythology’, as noted in Chapter 2. In this regard, McFague writes: ‘[E]cological interdependence … proclaims … a view of kinship … so radical that we can speak, metaphorically, of the earth as the common mother of all that exists on our planet’. Chapter 3 also contrasted the trans-sensory intelligibility of the medieval cosmos with McFague’s emphasis on ‘the things of the earth’ being themselves ‘the “body” of God’. But, as subjects in a ‘subject–subjects’ model, such things of the earth, while merely sensory in the Cartesian legacy, could perhaps, within the model of ‘the subjectification of the world’, become intelligible in a different way or even intelligent.

Jantzen describes the ‘divine’ on terms ‘analogous with the relationship between a person and her body’:

> It is indeed true that if the divine is to serve as the horizon of our becoming, then the divine must be transcendent … But from this it does not follow that the divine must be a separate entity, an ‘other’ being … any more than the requirement that human personhood be understood as irreducible to physicalism requires there to be a ‘soul-piece’ somehow lodged in the body but in principle detachable from it.

In this description the transcendent (but not separate) ‘divine’ derives its identity from a need to serve as the horizon of [women’s] becoming. In this proposal, as in Johnson’s and McFague’s outlined above, it would seem a short step, if it is not already taken, to God, nature and a sense of self finding a common identity.

---

55 Reagan & Stewart (ed.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, p. 46.
56 McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, p. 52. McFague’s metaphor here follows the pattern of Jantzen’s necessary symbolic in being mooted in connection with a proposed ‘sacred world order’.
57 McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, p. 112.
C. Nature Which Isn’t?

Irigaray’s editor outlines the conflict between a feminist search for identity and a postmodern ‘frame of non-reference’ in which subjectivity and identity are themselves subject to question. This tension can be observed in the method employed by McFague whose model of ecological interdependence is said to be constructed in line with feminist epistemology and process theology.\footnote{McFague, \textit{Super, Natural Christians}, p. 2.} The previous chapter explored some problems with McFague’s method in particular in relation to a scientific method. This section considers her search for identity and embodiment in terms of an alleged relationship with God and the natural world. Such a relationship appears to culminate in the suggestion that ‘Nature which is’ should be used as a term for God.\footnote{McFague, \textit{Super, Natural Christians}, p. 173.} I argue that McFague’s method is not compatible with the notion of nature as it is.

In \textit{Models of God} McFague describes her access (or lack of access) to reality as follows:

> Metaphors and models relate to reality not in imitating it but in being \textit{productive of it}. There are only versions, hypotheses, or models of reality (or God): the most one can say of any construct, then, is that it is illuminating, fruitful, can deal with anomalies, has relatively comprehensive explanatory ability, is relatively consistent, has humane consequences etc. This is largely a functional, pragmatic view of truth, with heavy stress on what the implications of \textit{certain ways of seeing things} (certain models) are for the quality of human and nonhuman life (since the initial assumption or belief is that God is on the side of life and its fulfilment)\footnote{McFague, \textit{Models of God}, p. 192, footnote 37. My italics.}
Given the human assumption that God is on the side of life and its fulfilment, McFague structures her view of reality accordingly. The external world (including God) is subject to the construct of the viewer. On such terms, God and reality in general have no accessible existence outside the model. What is accessible is produced by the viewer, says McFague. This is the ‘frame of non-reference’: given the lack of access to actual reality, interaction between independent parties is ruled out. Yet, as noted in the previous chapter, McFague bases her sense of identity on a search for interaction with the natural world.

In Super, Natural Christians. McFague contrasts a model that has ‘humane consequences’ with one that seeks to simply exercise control over nature. She refers to the former as the model of the ‘loving eye’ and to the latter as the model of the ‘arrogant eye’. She acknowledges the philosophical difficulty of loving what is not accessible:

But we are immediately drawn up short: we are trying …to see the world as it is so that we can love it rightly. But how, what, is it? How can we ‘see the world as it is’? There is no ‘natural’ view of nature. We know that there is no innocent eye, that what we see is determined in large measure by where we stand.

McFague proposes ‘Nature which is’ along the lines of Elizabeth A. Johnson’s SHE WHO IS as a source of language for God. At this point we are, in McFague’s words ‘immediately drawn up short’ by the question: how can we ‘see the world as it is’? There is, according to McFague, no natural view of nature. On such terms it would be at least equally true to term the model ‘Nature which isn’t’!

---

62 McFague, Models of God, p. 192, footnote 37.
63 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, p. 32.
64 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, p. 173.
Access, says McFague, is ‘in large measure’ limited by the perspective of the model. This greatly limited access is, in fact, a step back from denial of access to the external world expressed in *Models of God*. But the philosophical question of access is not the focus of interest for McFague. The main point is not whether access to the external world is possible but whether it is *beneficial*:

[W]e must remind ourselves that all seeing, all knowing is perspectival. The specific issue with which we are concerned - how should we love nature? – will necessarily be based on perspectival knowing. The question is, which perspective, which kind of seeing, is better for nature?65

In terms of determining what is ‘better’ for nature, Chapter 5 noted that McFague draws her values from human ideology (the ‘loving’ eye) influenced by what she calls a ‘sense of self in relation to the world’. 66 McFague asks whether the abstract, rationalistic sense of self giving rise to subject-object dualism is appropriate or whether the subject-subjects paradigm of the self and world that emerges from touch is a better model, ‘a more realistic one, a more humane one, perhaps even a more Christian one’.67 But despite the reference to Christianity, McFague has ruled out God as a source of values. She says that we do not really know what God is like. She states that our notion of ‘love’ is patterned on human types of love, e.g. of mother, lover, friend, which *project a possibility* that God’s love can be seen through them. She excludes the possibility, which she calls ‘Barthian’, that God defines love and that all human love only conforms to the divine pattern. 68 Where then does God fit in with the natural world said to operate as a source of values influencing the ‘loving eye’?

---

A God addressed as ‘Nature which is’ raises the questions of how such a God is related to nature and how such a God operates as ‘a personal, gracious power who is on the side of life and its fulfilment’.\(^{69}\) In terms of connection to the world, McFague states: ‘God is ‘related to the world as spirit is to body’;\(^{70}\) ‘everything that is is in God and God is in all things and yet God is not identical with the universe’;\(^{71}\) ‘God is the energy empowering the entire universe’.\(^{72}\) McFague also states that the view that God is not exhausted by all finite beings is ‘compatible with our model of God as the spirit that is the source, the life, the breath of reality’\(^{73}\). In this regard, Jantzen writes: ‘At least some forms of panentheism, while stressing that the world is inseparable from God, nevertheless also hold that “God’s inclusion of the world does not exhaust the reality of God”’.\(^{74}\) Jantzen goes on to remark:

> Insofar as this means that God could exist without the world, or that there is a ‘part’ or ‘aspect’ of God somehow beyond or other than the world, this collapses after all into dualism, and is not analogous with the relationship between a person and her body as I sketch it. If, on the other hand, it merely means that God is not reducible to physicalism, then it does not differ from pantheism. I suspect that ‘panentheists’ often shuffle rather uneasily between these two positions.

It may be added that the possibility of an uneasy shuffle between two positions could be even greater for McFague, given her acknowledged distinction between the God of the model and the God of the via negativa beyond all models. This impinges on the distinction between model classed as ‘experimenting with a bit of nonsense’\(^{75}\) and model as a source of language for God. Demythologized myth and a ‘truth’ claim for ‘remythologization’ are in tension here.

---

\(^{71}\) McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 149.  
\(^{72}\) McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 150.  
\(^{73}\) McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 149.  
A God related to the world as spirit to body raises the problem of theodicy. McFague proposes that the God of her model is good but unable to interfere with nature: ‘God does care about and side with the outcast and needy, while working in accord with the inexorable caprices of natural selection – God cannot set aside the laws of nature to benefit a chosen few.’\(^76\) It is not clear in how far God’s inability to interfere with nature is occasioned by identifying God with nature. As seen in Chapter 5, the natural world in McFague’s ‘ecological model’ is to be perceived as soul or spirit or ‘whatever we call that part of ourselves that we consider “more than” nature’.

\(^77\) When ‘Nature which is’ is presented as a model or metaphor for God, the context does not distinguish between using language derived from nature as a means of expressing something about God and identifying God with nature. *Super, Natural Christians* concludes with the suggestion that we should offer a hymn to ‘the things [of nature] themselves’.\(^78\) This attitude towards, and language about, nature, coupled with the notion that contact with the natural world offers a source of values, would appear to move in the direction of the divinisation of nature.

In *Super, Natural Christians* McFague purports to present a cosmology based on ecological interdependence. Nevertheless, she takes cognisance of ‘the survival of the fittest’ along with cancer cells and the AIDS virus. Interdependence *and* competition, while observable as factors in nature, become problematic in illustrating the character of God.\(^79\) The final paragraphs of *Super, Natural Christians* read:

> At sixty, I am once again six. I am filled with wonder at ordinary things – a child’s smile, a dog’s loping run, sticky new buds on a tree. But there is a

\(^{77}\) McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, p. 104.
difference between being sixty and six. The six-year-old does not flinch at the sight of a forest clear-cut or the eyes of a starving child.

A Christian nature spirituality is not nature romanticism. Nor is it very optimistic about the future (the planet may well deteriorate). It is, however, determinedly realistic: it begins and ends with a hymn to the things themselves. A Christian nature spirituality praises God for the wonder of the ordinary and promises to work on behalf of the sick and outcast wonderful, ordinary creatures. A Christian nature spirituality is also determinedly hopeful because it believes that the creator of these wonderful, ordinary creatures is working in, through and on behalf of us all.  

In this description the sixty-year-old is aware that nature can be negative. How then does God (termed Nature which is) ‘work in and through and on behalf of all’ (especially if the planet may well deteriorate)?

It is not clear to me how a Christian nature spirituality can be determinedly hopeful while not being very optimistic about the future. Neither is it clear how a ‘hymn to the things themselves’ can be determinedly realistic while the hymnist flinches at such things as the sight of the eyes of a starving child. Nature as it is appears to be subject to challenge. A Christian nature spirituality ‘promises to work for the sick and outcast’, to try and change things as they are rather than to sing hymns to them. Not only does the love of the ‘loving eye’ come from a source independent of the so-called creator. The love of the ‘loving eye’ appears committed to a course that runs counter to ‘Nature which is’, presumably said to refer to the ‘creator’. On such terms, one might surmise that ‘Nature which is’ becomes ‘Nature which is not yet’. That this is not the biblical notion of ‘not yet’ will be considered in the next section.

---

It should be recalled that nearly all McFague’s language about God is the language of models. ²² It is evident that within the model, the world (including humanity) is said to be dependent on the ‘panentheistic’ God. ²³ But, in the absence of revelation, the God of the model depends on the human model-maker. The ‘is’ of ‘Nature which is’ is a very different notion to the ‘IS’ of the self-existing God. Section A of this chapter noted that for Augustine, the ‘IS’ of the self-existing God is to be understood as reaching a much higher and yet more personal level to his previous notion of the infinite God filling the creation like a boundless sea filling a sponge. ²⁴ But Keller identifies Augustine’s cosmic sponge as his most ‘tehomophilic’ trope. ²⁵ The notion that a ‘panentheistic’ God is supportive of women’s identity needs to be weighed against the kind of ‘IS’ that is said to support such a notion of identity. Setting aside the question of models, how reliable is a God of the cosmic sponge as a source of identity for women and how interactive is such a source in informing women of their identity?

D. St. Francis and St. Clare

While her ecological model is said to give ‘us a way to think about ourselves as profoundly embodied, relational, responsive beings’, ²⁶ McFague nevertheless looks beyond ecology in search of further inspiration for embodiment. In this regard, she cites ‘the rich’, ‘lived in’ and symbolic medieval cosmology, ²⁷ and the ‘radically incarnational’ approach that she discerns in the attitude to nature of Francis of

²² See McFague, Models of God, p. 192, n. 37.
²³ See The Body of God, p. 150. McFague writes that the model ‘radicalizes both divine immanence (God is the breath of each and every creature) and divine transcendence (God is the energy empowering the entire universe)’.
²⁴ Augustine, Confessions VII, 5, cf, VII, 10.
²⁵ Keller, Face of the Deep, p. 81.
²⁶ McFague, Super, Natural Christians, p. 92.
²⁷ McFague, Super, Natural Christians, chapter 3.
Assisi. But the assumptions behind medieval cosmology and a Franciscan attitude to nature are, I argue, at odds with McFague’s assumptions. This section contrasts a search for human identity through nature and the expectation that nature receives identity through redeemed humanity, the latter illustrated in a legend about St. Francis and St. Clare, recounted by G. K. Chesterton. Reflection on this contrast begins with some thoughts from the preceding section.

In describing his experience of the God who IS, Augustine writes: ‘Your light shone on me with its brilliance, and I thrilled with love and dread alike. I realized that I was far away from you. It was as though I were in a land where all is different from your own’. Augustine heard God’s voice saying ‘I am the food of full-grown men. Grow and you shall feed on me. But you shall not change me into your own substance, as you do with the food of your body. Instead you shall be changed into me’. While this vision denies that God is connected with creation in a material way (except by implication in the Incarnation) it does not deny the participation of humanity in the Godhead.

How then does the natural world fit in with this? Paul Fiddes states: ‘In the New Testament, according to Paul in Romans 8: 19-22, the whole universe “groans as if in the pangs of childbirth” (NEB), waiting for God to set it free, with its destiny deeply bound up with the redemption of God’s human children’. In this regard Romans 8: 19-23 is worth quoting in full:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in

---

89 Augustine, *Confessions VII, 10*. The term ‘men’ is obviously inclusive of women.
90 Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p.145.
labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have
the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the
redemption of our bodies.

Here the method of receiving identity runs in the opposite direction to the method
described above, of a search for identity *through* nature. Through *human redemption*,
says the apostle Paul, nature receives a new identity, free from the bondage of futility
and decay: not only humanity but also the renewed natural world will participate in
the Godhead.

McFague, on the other hand, suggests that traditional Christianity has left out the
natural world. In *Super, Natural Christians*, she summarizes traditional Christianity
as: ‘Christ came to earth to save humanity 2,000 years ago and will come again to
usher the redeemed into heaven’. 91 Instead of this, she proposes a Christian nature
spirituality, described in the preceding section. In such a spirituality, a sense of self
arises through contact with the natural world. She goes so far as to draw attention to
Genesis 1 in which nature is described as ‘good’. 92 But she leaves out the tradition of
what has happened to nature, in being subjected to futility, and omits what is
promised to nature through human redemption.

Though asserting that nature is ‘good’, McFague also recognizes that nature is
flawed, that there is such a thing as ‘fang and claw’ and ‘survival of the fittest’. 93 For
McFague, something of the redemptive role appears to be undertaken by humans
acting in a ‘loving’ way towards nature. 94 She mentions a possibility that ‘the next
step in evolution’ may be ‘a cultural one of solidarity’:

---

The community model says that the well-being of the whole is the final goal … Utopias … that people imagine and sometimes try to create, give us clues as to what such communities might be like. They are almost always ones in which the lion and the lamb … lie down together … The kingdom of God and the Eucharistic banquet are such clues for Christians.95

As I understand her, this redemptive method derives from a way of seeing things with a ‘loving eye’ which in turn derives from a sense of identity through being in touch with nature.

McFague claims to find inspiration for her ecological model of the self and the world from Francis of Assisi. She writes:

In letting things be what they are, we will learn how to care for them more appropriately. We will also see how interrelated and interdependent all of us are. Perhaps we will glimpse as well how these others are, now and then, images of the divine, even as we are. If we could develop such a sensibility, we might become, following Francis of Assisi, super, natural Christians. Developing this sensibility … involves the ‘loving eye’, the eye that sees ourselves and others, including earth others, as profoundly related while at the same time able to respect real differences.96

In this regard, I want to draw attention to two instances of what G. K. Chesterton calls the true Franciscan spirit and to ask: which comes first for St. Francis, God or nature? And where does a sense of self fit in? Chesterton states that ‘if there is one place in which the true Franciscan spirit can be found outside the true Franciscan story, it is in the tale of the Tumbler of Our Lady’.97 He goes on to say:

But herein is the essential part of the parable. Our Lady’s Tumbler did not stand on his head in order to see flowers and trees as a clearer or quaintier

95 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, pp. 157 -158. Cf. McFague, The Body of God, p. 181. See also Chapter 5, section B.
96 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, p. 66. McFague quotes Bonaventure ‘Major Life of St. Francis, 8.6’ in (ed.) Marian A. Habig, St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973): ‘[St. Francis] called all creatures … by the name of brother or sister, because he knew that they all had in common with him the same beginning’. She does not add that Bonaventure goes on to say: ‘However he reserved his most tender compassion for those creatures which … are used in Sacred Scripture as figures of [Christ]’, nor does she refer to the story that follows about the curse, placed by St. Francis, on a sow that gobbled up a new-born lamb.
vision. He did not do so; and it would never have occurred to him to do so. Our Lady’s Tumbler stood on his head to please Our Lady. If St. Francis had done the same thing, as he was quite capable of doing, it would originally have been from the same motive … It would be after this that his enthusiasm would extend itself and give a sort of halo to the edges of all earthly things.  

McFague describes her ‘ecological model of self and world’ as a way of seeing things. Chesterton says that the Franciscan spirit would never have thought of concocting a way of seeing things. The focus is somewhere else.

Chesterton also writes about ‘the beautiful friendship of St. Francis and St. Clare’:

I know no better symbol than that found by felicity of popular legend, which says that one night the people of Assisi thought the trees and holy house were on fire, and rushed up to extinguish the conflagration. But they found all quiet within, where St. Francis broke bread with St. Clare at one of their rare meetings, and talked of the love of God.

In the legend the focus is on the love of God. It is not about a sense of self:

Chesterton describes St. Francis and St. Clare as ‘the unconscious figures on the hill’, not thinking about themselves or nature. Nature is depicted as entering into the human relationship with God: Chesterton describes nature as a ‘red halo’ that embraced the two figures on the hill, a ‘flame feeding on nothing and setting the very air on fire’.

Romans 8:19-23 tells us that nature is in bondage to decay. Nature will find its redeemed identity through the redemption of humanity. This story of St. Francis and St. Clare illustrates what that redemption might be like. I submit that the picture is very different from what is suggested in McFague’s ‘Christian nature spirituality’.

98 Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi, p. 71, italics Chesterton’s.
99 Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi, pp. 110, 113.
Conclusion

This and the previous chapter have examined a search for women’s identity in a climate of conflict between modernist and postmodern presuppositions. While the emancipatory thrust of feminism is rooted in subjectivity stemming from the Enlightenment, subjectivity itself has been subjected to critique. With the deconstruction of linguistic efficacy accompanying loss of access to external reality, focus has shifted to the inner world of the subconscious mind. In such circumstances the source of identity is no longer an external deity; instead the possibility arises of a new divinised source of identity within a constructed ‘exteriority’. But at the same time the emancipatory thrust founded on subjectivity is not abandoned. The result appears to be two sources of identity for women, constructing and constructed with no observable resolution except that of passing on the dilemma to the reader.

The search for women’s identity purports to be a search for embodiment and a rejection of ‘dualism’. But loss of access to external reality is not conducive to a sense of embodiment, nor is a conflict of presuppositions conducive to overcoming ‘dualism’. The quest for relationship with the natural world runs counter to an approach that emphasizes imaginative construal. The attempt to overcome dualism runs the risk, it is argued, of what Ricoeur identifies as the danger of rationalizing symbols as such.

For Keller, the Word is associated with power wielded against women. A feminized, potentially material locus of creation stands in opposition to a masculinized, immaterial creator who needs nothing but his own logos to create. In this sense the feminized story is connected with a first cause that shares the material
character of the universe. It is unclear how such a first cause could communicate identity, not least in being characterized by indeterminacy.

For Johnson, the search for identity for women begins with the inner world of self. Great symbols for the divine, she says, are generated from the deep abyss of human existence. Such an approach appears linked with a Jungian discernment of an ancient metaphysical world transferred to the subconscious mind. By a different path, McFague’s subject-subjects model could end up at a similar point. If the natural world, characterized as ‘Nature which is’, were to be regarded as ‘subject’ on equal terms with the constructing self, nature might tend to become personified in order to allow for a species of intercommunion between ‘subjects’. Jantzen’s discernment of an uneasy shuffle between theism and pantheism would seem relevant here. One might wonder what would become of an attempt to ‘live in’ such conceptions. A divinised creation founders on theodicy, a point raised by Augustine.

Meanwhile McFague’s appeal to St. Francis of Assisi as exemplar of an integrated reality serves to show the distance, rather than the proximity, of the true Franciscan spirit to a postmodern quest for identity for women. Chesterton’s depiction of Francis and Clare on the hill above Assisi illustrates an orientation of gendered humanity towards the living God. It is a long road from postmodern projection to a true Franciscan orientation. But a quest for identity, like any other quest, sometimes needs to take the long road.