

REVIEW ESSAY

## The Necessity of Recognizing Distinctions: Lessons from Evangelical Critiques of Christian Feminist Theology

By Randy L. Maddox

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Surely it is now clear that the feminist critique *within* Christian circles and the attempts to develop alternative inclusive forms of Christian confession and practice are more than a passing fad. The issues raised and the suggestions made affect central aspects of traditional Christian life and thought. As such, it is crucial that Christian scholars and leaders, particularly those in the evangelical traditions, enter into dialogue with these issues in an honest attempt to determine their appropriateness to or possible contradiction of the essential Christian faith.

307

One aspect of any such a dialogue would be exegetical debates about the relevant biblical materials. Such debates have been taking place in evangelical circles for some time now. While they have often been overly polemical, they have nonetheless spawned a number of careful studies representing significantly diverse conclusions—from total rejections of the feminist critique to attempts at articulating a biblical feminism.<sup>1</sup>

Much slower in forthcoming have been evangelical assessments of the more general *theological* claims and conclusions of Christian feminists. The purpose of the present essay is to summarize the concerns of three largely negative assessments that have appeared and reflect on the adequacy of their assumptions and method.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, these studies all focus on issues related to the nature of God and of God-language, expressing serious concerns about or rejections of the feminist alternatives to traditional "male" views of God.<sup>3</sup>

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Feminist contributions to Christian theology have encountered mixed responses from Christian theologians of other persuasions. In this review essay Randy L. Maddox discusses three recent books which criticize feminist theology from an evangelical standpoint, and draws conclusions about the "necessity of recognizing distinctions." Mr. Maddox, who wrote about "inclusive theology" in *CSR* XVI:1, teaches religion at Sioux Falls College.

William Oddie is a fellow of St. Cross College and the librarian of Pusey House, Oxford. As such, he is a representative of evangelical high-church Anglicanism in the tradition of C. S. Lewis. His contribution to the evangelical assessment of Christian feminism arose in response to the Movement for the Ordination of Women in Anglicanism. Oddie is convinced that much more is at stake in this issue than simply ordination. Ultimately, he is worried about *What will happen to God*<sup>4</sup> if the feminist perspectives which ground the movement are adopted, because he realizes that these perspectives call into question traditional understandings of the "nature of man and of God himself" (pp. xi, 26). The goal of Oddie's book, then, is to defend the Fatherhood of God, the Sonship of Christ (xiii) and the legitimacy of traditional masculine/feminine characterizations and corresponding social roles (pp. 24, 33, 63ff).

Foundational to Oddie's defense of traditional positions and rejection of feminist critiques are three basic presuppositions. First, he assumes that the fact that God's self-revelation came within the particular social structures of the biblical cultures bestows on these cultures a divine warrant which makes them normative for all times and places (pp. 50–51). When Christian feminists dare to criticize any aspect of these cultures it is taken as evidence that they do not really believe in revelation (pp. xii, 27). Instead, they are accused of seeking to substitute *their* ideas about God for *God's* idea of Godself (p. 110).

Second, Oddie assumes that the task of theology is simply to hand on unchanged (or, if presently lost, to recover) the doctrinal formulations of the early Church.<sup>5</sup> He rejects totally the suggestion that theology is actually a constructive activity and that the changed situation of the modern Church requires a reconstruction of basic traditional doctrines,<sup>6</sup> arguing that this suggestion leads inevitably to theology merely mirroring the ever shifting secular assumptions of the passing age (p. xii).

Finally, Oddie assumes that the authority of human experience in general and Christian tradition in particular is identical with the majority opinion on

<sup>1</sup>For a survey of the variety of current readings of biblical texts on the role and status of women see Randy L. Maddox, "The Word of God and Patriarchalism: A Typology of the Contemporary Christian Debate," *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, nyp.

<sup>2</sup>Note that we are reviewing evangelical critiques of the Christian feminists, *not* evangelical attempts to articulate a Christian feminist position such as, in particular, Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism for Today*, Second Edition (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>For an evangelical analysis that attempts to suggest the possible *positive* contributions and insights of the Christian feminist critique for the *whole range* of Christian doctrine see Randy L. Maddox, "Toward an Inclusive Theology: The Systematic Implications of the Feminist Critique," *Christian Scholar's Review* 16 (1986–7): 7–23.

<sup>4</sup>William Oddie, *What Will Happen to God?: Feminism and the Reconstruction of Christian Belief* (London: SPCK, 1984).

<sup>5</sup>In keeping with his Anglican tradition, he appears to limit authoritative Christian tradition to the first four centuries of the Church. More importantly, he limits it to the *traditional* reading of this period, arguing that feminist investigations of early Church history "fabricate" evidence for their claims rather than recognizing what is really there (cf. his comments of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, p. 143).

<sup>6</sup>Cf. p. 119 and the pejorative use of the word "reconstruction" in the subtitle of his book.

whatever issue is at question. He repeatedly charges that Christian feminist critiques and alternatives are minority opinions and, hence, necessarily false (pp. 33, 63, 78). More pointedly, he argues that the failure of Christian feminists to agree with the majority proves that they reject authority per se, opting instead for pure independence or individualism in matters of religious belief (p. 82).

The validity of these presuppositions which form the basis for Oddie's critique is quite questionable. For example, most biblical scholars, including evangelicals, argue that it is essential to distinguish between the normative elements of God's revelation in the biblical cultures and the elements which are relative to those cultures alone or may even contradict God's revelation.<sup>7</sup> If Oddie wants to claim that the male-normative features of biblical cultures are essential to God's revelation he should ground the claim in careful exegesis, not mere assertion.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, affirmation of the constructive and situation-related nature of theological affirmations is axiomatic for nearly all modern theologians, liberal and conservative.<sup>9</sup> If Oddie is rejecting this central contemporary theological conviction, he is surely obligated to do so explicitly rather than by default.

Finally, it is quite ironic to find one who repeatedly emphasizes the reality of original sin and its distorting effects on human understanding (at least on feminist understanding (see pp. 26, 101), arguing that the majority opinion of human societies (or *human* Christian tradition) is *self-evidently* of ultimate authority in norming Christian life and thought.

Obviously, the problematic character of Oddie's foundational presuppositions weakens the persuasiveness of his overall argument. There is, however, an even more serious methodological problem with his study. Put briefly, Oddie consistently distorts the Christian feminist position by confusing it with or unfairly identifying it with post-Christian feminist advocates and claims.

To begin with, Oddie repeatedly draws on Goddess movement advocates like Carol Christ, Mary Daly and Judith Plaskow in his exposition of what Christian feminists purportedly believe and seek, even though all of these women are explicitly post-Christian feminists (cf. pp. 3, 9, 17, 78). When pressed on this matter, Oddie argues that any apparent disagreements about theological issues between Christian and post-Christian feminists are actually insignificant because "the wildest and most spiritually dangerous beliefs are not enough to break the solidarity of the 'sisterhood'" that unites them (pp. 18–19). However,

<sup>7</sup>For evangelical examples of such a distinction (and some guidelines for helping determine what is normative), see Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It Is Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), pp. 65–70; and David Scholer, "Unseasonable Thoughts on the State of Biblical Hermeneutics," *American Baptist Quarterly* 2 (1983): 134–41.

<sup>8</sup>For a detailed evangelical exegetical argument that male-normative aspects of Scripture are *not* essential revelation, see Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

<sup>9</sup>Note the commonality of this theme in the variety of contemporary positions treated in *The Vocation of the Theologian*, edited by Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). See also the chapter on "Theology Today" in Gillian Evans, Alister McGrath and Allan Galloway, *The Science of Theology*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 345–52.

the only evidence he presents for such a solidarity is the fact that Christian feminists often recommend the reading of Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*.<sup>10</sup> Apparently, he assumes that this implies they agree with *everything* in Daly's book—surely a questionable assumption. Or, perhaps Oddie is assuming a version of Harold Lindsell's notorious "slippery slope" argument—namely, if one ever grants any truth or sympathy to any argument of the post-Christian feminists they will soon become one themselves!<sup>11</sup> Either way, his assumption blinds him to numerous crucial differences that do exist between Christian and post-Christian feminists.

For example, it is simply not the case that most Christian feminist theologians advocate literal construals of God as female alongside of or in place of God as male.<sup>12</sup> Rather most of them argue for a recovery of the classical understanding of the *analogical* nature of *all* God-language including both male and female language about God.<sup>13</sup> Where they differ from Oddie is not in arguing God is female but in denying that God is male in any literal sense<sup>14</sup> and in affirming that *both* male and female analogies of God have biblical warrant and provide important disclosures of truth about God.

It is likewise not the case, as Oddie claims (p. 38), that Christian feminist theologians typically endorse an androgynous model of humanity, though many post-Christian feminists do. Actually, most Christian feminists are very critical of the concept of androgyny.<sup>15</sup> Their concern is to argue that humanity as male and female are equal, not that they are the same.

Several other examples of distortions in Oddie's caricature of Christian feminism could be mentioned. We will conclude, instead, by noting two other limitations of his study in general. First, he apparently is incapable of empathizing with the oppression that many women feel from male-normative language and social structures. Thus, he asks incredulously how such practices as the rabbinic prayer that thanks God for not being born a woman (p. 47) or such teachings as Aquinas's claim that women are misbegotten males (p. 148) could possibly be construed as misogynist!

Finally, the entire study is soured by a strident tone which renders it unlikely to communicate any legitimate concerns which Oddie might raise about Christian feminism. Not uncommon are rhetorical flourishes such as the com-

<sup>10</sup>(Boston: Beacon Press, 1973). This is Daly's first and still most readable post-Christian articulation of religious feminism.

<sup>11</sup>Note his claim that the life story of Meinrad Craighead (a Benedictine who began to study Goddess worship and eventually left the order) is a kind of *locus classicus* of feminist spirituality (p. 81).

<sup>12</sup>See, for example, the strong Christian feminist critique of the Goddess movement in Denise Lardner Carmody, *Feminism and Christianity: A Two-Way Reflection* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), pp. 33–5.

<sup>13</sup>For more details on this topic see Maddox, "Inclusive Theology," pp. 13–14.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Oddie's claim that talk about God as Father is more than metaphorical (p. 119—which he seems to equate with analogical, p. 112), it is symbolic—which he defines as involving a literal, though suprarational, identity with what is described. In this whole discussion Oddie shows little understanding of the important classical distinctions between metaphorical, analogical, univocal and symbolic language.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), pp. 110–11.

parison of feminist revisions of the liturgy with the ideological propaganda of the Soviet Encyclopedia (p. 108)! Throughout Oddie makes abundantly clear his conviction that Christian feminists are solely responsible for the Church's current "bitter harvest of division, anger, suspicion and all uncharitableness" (p. 155).

Obviously, a book with such serious flaws does not hold much promise of promoting or guiding a constructive dialogue between traditional evangelical Christianity and the Christian feminist critique.

### Donald Bloesch, Book I

Donald Bloesch, professor of Systematic Theology at Dubuque Theological Seminary, is a prominent American evangelical theologian. His numerous books on the nature of evangelical piety and theology have earned him a reputation for fairness in describing alternative viewpoints and insight in analyzing theological problems. As such, one would expect his two recent books pertaining to the Christian feminist critique to be more helpful than Oddie's. Such expectations are, unfortunately, only partially fulfilled.

In his first study Bloesch struggles with the question: *Is the Bible Sexist?*<sup>16</sup> Exposure to the feminist critique has convinced him that ideological patriarchy is not a Christian alternative. However, he is equally suspicious of ideological feminism because both alternatives (in his view) focus on humanity and our selfish concerns rather than on God and others. Accordingly, Bloesch's stated aim is to provide an evangelical alternative *beyond* patriarchy and feminism (p. 11). In reality, what he presents is a position he calls "reformed patriarchy" (p. 86).<sup>17</sup>

The content of Bloesch's "reformed patriarchy" is most evident in his discussion of male/female relationships in society and home. He believes that feminists want to deny *all* interdependence of man and woman, both within and outside of marriage (pp. 39, 86). By contrast, he argues, the Bible stresses the interdependence of the sexes and the ultimate dependence of woman on man. He is convinced that Scripture presents male headship as part of God's creation will for the *good* of woman. At the same time, he is sensitive to how such headship has frequently taken oppressive forms due to sin (p. 32). Accordingly, he argues that the truly Christian way for the male to exercise headship is Christ's model of servanthood (pp. 85ff.), leading to ideal male/female relationships of *mutual* submission. In those less than ideal cases where full agreement or mutuality is not possible, however, he reaffirms male headship (pp. 58, 88–89)—thus, his "reformed patriarchy."

The second major issue that Bloesch deals with in his first study is the debate about women in positions of spiritual leadership. Here he is much more

<sup>16</sup>(Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1982).

<sup>17</sup>Cf. the treatment of Bloesch under the general category of "Liberated Traditionalists" in Maddox, "Word of God."

critical of past tradition than on the previous issue. Indeed, he presents a strong argument for women in all forms of ministry, including the ministry of word and sacrament. He bases his argument ultimately on the implications of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

One might expect such a strong defense of women in ministry to endear Bloesch to Christian feminists. However, they actually find his position quite problematic because of his significant qualification that women ministers must continue to be "womanly."<sup>18</sup> At issue here are not matters like manner of dress but Bloesch's concern that women ministers not call into question the principle of male headship or the worthiness of the vocation of motherhood (pp. 55–56). This concern leads him to prefer celibate women ministers since they would not be neglecting their family duties or inviting possible conflicts with their spouse's vocational opportunities (pp. 58–59).<sup>19</sup> In addition, Bloesch suggests that a woman minister should not hold a position where she exercises authority over a male staff member.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, he is not advocating total equality of women in ministry.

The final topic Bloesch discusses in *Is the Bible Sexist?* is the suggested modifications of God-language that have been put forward by feminists. On the surface, Bloesch seems to bring a more-developed awareness of the intricacies of God-language to his analysis of this topic than we noted in Oddie. He explicitly mentions the classical theological distinction that human language about God is neither totally univocal nor totally figurative; it is analogical (p. 67). According to this classical distinction, human God-language does assert a *real* similarity between the ordinary meaning of a term and the meaning of this term in reference to God. However, this similarity is always one of proportionality, not identity.<sup>21</sup> Thus, for example, to call God "Father" is not to equate God totally with the normal characteristics of a human father. In particular, it does not imply God is exclusively male, for the God of the Bible actually transcends the human gender division into male and female, embracing both in the image of God (p. 66).

Actually, Bloesch's reference to the category of analogy is not as traditional as it appears at first. When pushed, it becomes clear that he believes there is more univocal content in analogical attribution than the classic understanding of analogy would allow.<sup>22</sup> This is particularly the case in the area of gender (social stereotype?!<sup>23</sup>) references to God, as can be seen both in Bloesch's analysis of biblical God-language and in his reservations about feminist God-language.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. reviews of *Is the Bible Sexist?* by Ginny Soley in *Sojourners* 12.3 (March 1983): 41–2, and David Scholer in *Update* 10.2 (Summer 1986): 14–5.

<sup>19</sup>There is no mention of similar concerns about male ministers and their family life!

<sup>20</sup>Another option Bloesch mentions that would satisfy both of these concerns is husband/wife ministry teams like those of the Salvation Army.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. the classic discussion of analogy in Eric Mascall, *Existence and Analogy* (London: Longmans, 1949), pp. 97–121.

<sup>22</sup>Bloesch seemed closer to this classical sense of analogy in his earlier works. See especially *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), II:275.

<sup>23</sup>Note that Bloesch consistently uses the terms "masculine" and "feminine" rather than "male" and "female," thereby confusing distinctions of physical gender with distinctions of social roles and ster-

Feminist protests have convinced Bloesch that traditional Christian language for God has been too exclusively patriarchal, overlooking the female imagery for God present in Scripture itself (pp. 65–66). However, he does not draw from this realization the conclusion that male and female analogies for God are equally legitimate. Rather, he argues that it is providential that patriarchal and masculine [*sic*] imagery is used in Scripture to describe the being and acts of God more than feminine [*sic*] imagery (p. 68). While God is not literally male, masculine imagery is more appropriate to God because the biblical God is more properly a God of power, initiative and superordination than a God of nurture and receptivity (pp. 66, 72). To alter the predominance of male imagery for God would, Bloesch argues, obscure this essential Christian understanding of the nature of God.<sup>24</sup>

It is in this context that one must understand Bloesch's rejections of feminist alternatives to traditional God-language. He is convinced, for example, that any increase in the use of female imagery for God will lead to a form of pantheism or nature mysticism (pp. 10, 63–64). At the same time, he believes the alternative recommended practice of avoiding all personal images for God will lead inevitably to a deistic or Neoplatonic view of God (p. 65). Thus, the biblical precedent must be maintained.

Such are Bloesch's concerns and convictions in *Is the Bible Sexist?* As a more nuanced and scholarly work than Oddie's, it clearly should be more helpful in fostering dialogue between traditional evangelical theology and the Christian feminists. Ultimately, however, we believe the value it has in this regard is more in helping to locate what the crucial issues are (particularly in relation to understandings of God) than in providing final solutions to these issues.

For example, it becomes clear in Bloesch's discussion that the analogical status of God-language is a crucial issue. While Bloesch appears to assume that feminists advocate understanding God as literally female, Christian feminist theologians are actually more concerned to reaffirm the *truly* analogical nature of God-language and, thereby, to reject as idolatrous *any* literal understanding of God as male or female.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, while Bloesch himself verbally affirms the analogical nature of God-language, we have seen that he ultimately holds out for a univocal "core" of reference in the biblical masculine imagery for God, thereby advocating an understanding of God as more properly male than female.<sup>26</sup> Christian feminists would suggest this is still an idolatrous view.

eotypes! He apparently believes that physical gender differences are ontological bases for the social differences, though he never explicitly argues this point.

<sup>24</sup>This conviction helps explain as well Bloesch's total lack of concern about using exclusively masculine pronouns to refer to God. Note, in particular, such sentences as: "God in *his* (emphasis added) relation to us as Nurturer, Guide and Comforter may be envisaged as feminine" (p. 72).

<sup>25</sup>Obviously, this is a *generalization* about the tendency among *Christian* feminist theologians, not a claim that there are no examples of feminists who construe God as literally female. For backing for this generalization, see the references in Maddox, "Inclusive Theology," pp. 13–14.

<sup>26</sup>Bloesch would say "more properly 'masculine'" but, again, he seems to assume such social traits are ontologically grounded in gender distinctions.

Likewise, Bloesch correctly perceives that the feminist rejection of exclusively male God-language is inherently a rejection of the hierarchal and dualistic understandings of God that predominate in Western Christian tradition (and the corresponding hierarchal understanding of the relationship of male and female). For Bloesch, such a rejection of hierarchal views of God is simply unacceptable (pp. 10, 62). However, he never addresses the claim of Christian feminists that hierarchal and dualistic understandings of God are actually distorted ("male") impositions on the biblical understanding of God.<sup>27</sup>

Actually, it is not surprising that Bloesch does not answer this Christian feminist claim. In reality, he does not appear to be very aware of their position. The feminists he tends to quote throughout the book are primarily political and philosophical feminists. When he does quote feminist theologians, he draws almost totally on post-Christian feminists such as Mary Daly and Naomi Goldenberg. There is no significant interaction with Christian feminists such as Rosemary Ruether, Phyllis Trible and Virginia Mollenkott. More disappointingly, from an evangelical perspective, there is no mention at all of Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty's groundbreaking evangelical feminist book *All We're Meant to Be*, even though it had been in circulation for seven years!

The predictable result of neglecting these serious attempts to formulate a Christian feminism is that Bloesch repeatedly portrays as "the uniform feminist position" stances that most Christian feminists would either significantly qualify or reject.<sup>28</sup> One can only wonder why Bloesch would attempt a Christian analysis of feminism without the benefit or courtesy of dialoguing with the readily available works of Christian feminists.

A further surprising weakness in *Is the Bible Sexist?* is Bloesch's simplistic references to the "language of Canaan" as a defense for the predominance of male imagery in Christian God-talk.<sup>29</sup> Bloesch, in his earlier works, developed a reputation as an evangelical who affirmed a careful distinction between the Word of God and the words of Scripture and who recognized that God's revelation in Scripture contains a fallible element due to the cultural limitations of the writers.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, he now rejects any attempt to separate the meaning of Scripture from its culturally conditioned form (p. 13), apparently accepting the biblical cultures as divinely ordained and warranted (p. 76).

At least, he so accepts their male-normative linguistic practice. He does *not*, however, adopt every aspect of biblical cultures. For example, we have seen him dissent from the Old Testament exclusion of women from priestly ministry. But,

<sup>27</sup>See especially Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology. Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp. 21, 166ff.

<sup>28</sup>Compare his generalizations about feminists supporting androgyny, pantheism, etc., with the survey of Christian feminists in Maddox, "Inclusive Theology."

<sup>29</sup>For a more sophisticated defense of such "language of Canaan" against the critique of feminists see Vernard Eller, *The Language of Canaan and the Grammar of Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). Cf. our argument in a review of Eller (*Christian Scholar's Review* 12 [1983]: 267–69) that the logic of his case is fundamentally flawed.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Bloesch, *Essentials*, 1:68–9.

this poses a key issue that Bloesch never addresses. What are the hermeneutic principles that justify his rejection of one aspect of biblical cultures while affirming another aspect. Until such principles are stated and defended, his option for the "language of Canaan" appears, at best, subjective and arbitrary.

The final, most annoying, problem with *Is the Bible Sexist?* is Bloesch's uncritical utilization throughout of stereotypical Western middle-class understandings of "masculine" and "feminine" as if they were ontologically grounded and universally accepted characterizations (cf. pp. 66, 36–37).<sup>31</sup> Such lack of sensitivity is made all the more notable by his frequent protest against harmonizing biblical faith with *any* cultural ideology (p. 13).

### Donald Bloesch, Book II

Bloesch's deepest concerns about the Christian feminist/traditionalist debate emerge in his second book. He now considers resistance to Christian feminist understandings of God to be, ultimately, *The Battle for the Trinity*.<sup>32</sup> More precisely, he now argues that the main issues at stake in this debate are: 1) the viability of the doctrine of the trinity and 2) the acceptance of the authority of Scripture (p. xv).

Bloesch's claim to be defending the doctrine of the trinity against the feminists is, in a real sense, misleading.<sup>33</sup> In his development of this claim it becomes clear that he is still *primarily* concerned to defend the normative status of male imagery for God. He views the essence of the doctrine of the trinity to be its affirmation that God is personal (as opposed to being the impersonal or suprapersonal ground and source of all existence, p. 11) and he believes that this affirmation of God as personal is inextricably interwoven with the primary use of male imagery for God.<sup>34</sup>

Bloesch develops his defense of male imagery for God in this second study through a more explicit consideration of the nature of God-language. Drawing on Sally McFague, he makes a distinction between seeing God-language as metaphorical—giving seminal insights but no exact (univocal) or even proportional (analogical) knowledge; or as symbolic—assuming a greater adequacy of such language to communicate reliable knowledge of God's reality (p. 16). He then argues, with real warrant, that the tendency of modern theologians in general and feminists in particular is to construe God-language primarily as metaphorical, thereby emphasizing the lack of correspondance between such language (the sign) and God's nature (the signified) (pp. 17–22). By contrast, he wants to assert the symbolic nature of God-language and, thereby, the significant *correspondence* between God-language and God's nature.

<sup>31</sup>For an analysis of these stereotypes as culturally relative, see Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be*, pp. 95–108.

<sup>32</sup>Ann Arbor: Servant, 1985.

<sup>33</sup>See below our argument that many Christian feminists articulate a more thoroughly trinitarian view of God than Bloesch.

<sup>34</sup>See his response to a critique of this book by Thomas Finger in *TSF Bulletin* 10.1 (1986–7): 43, point 7.

But, what is the nature and extent of this correspondence? Frankly, on this issue Bloesch's presentation is confusing, if not contradictory. At times he appears to equate symbolic language with analogical language—suggesting a correspondence of proportionality (pp. 16, 17).<sup>35</sup> At other times he treats "symbol" as a more general category that embraces both metaphor and analogy (p. 21). At still other times he uses "symbolic" disparagingly as the opposite of "true knowledge" (pp. 13, 35). While this confusion makes a schema of Bloesch's understanding of the nature of God-language impossible, his fundamental concern is clear: he wants to affirm that human (especially, biblical) language about God expresses at least a core of "true knowledge" about God. Moreover, it is clear he sees this emphasis as moving in the opposite direction of most influential modern theologians.<sup>36</sup>

It is also clear that Bloesch considers the masculine [*sic*]<sup>37</sup> connotations of the symbol of God as Father to be central to the "true knowledge" we have about God. Indeed, he argues explicitly that God as Father is a controlling symbol for the Christian understanding of God. By contrast, any biblical images of God as Mother are only *metaphorical* (pp. 34–35). As such, while the God of the Bible is not literally male (p. xviii), Bloesch does consider this God as more properly "masculine" than "feminine."

What are Bloesch's grounds for arguing that the image of God as Father is the controlling symbol for a Christian understanding of God? At first, he simply argues that biblical symbols establish the parameters of theological thinking (p. 26). Such a claim is, of course, problematic because some central symbols and affirmations of Christian faith are not directly biblically attested: for example, God as triune! More importantly, the Bible actually contains a wealth of symbols for God, including several female symbols.

So, why elevate the male or "masculine" symbols as controlling symbols? It appears that Bloesch's main reason is simply the predominance of male images versus, in particular, female images in the Bible. Since God is addressed more often in male terms and ascribed "masculine" characteristics, God is more properly masculine than feminine. But again, this argument is very problematic. A central principle of *Christian* biblical hermeneutics is that the focus and authoritative grid of revelation is *Christ's* life and teachings. As such, Christ's imagery for God should be determinative.

This may appear to play into Bloesch's hands since Christ's most charac-

<sup>35</sup>He suggests that McFague makes this connection. She does not! Indeed, the major weakness of *Metaphorical Theology* is that she never clarifies the relationship of her understanding of metaphorical and symbolic language to the classical understanding of analogy.

<sup>36</sup>We would also suggest that it is out-of-step with the *classical* understanding of analogy because it does not take the *disjunctive* aspect of proportionality seriously enough. This is seen most clearly in his suggestion that some (male only?) biblical analogies for God proceed from *above* to *below* (pp. 18, 25, 45). Such an attempt to bypass human experience and leap directly to revelation seems both cognitively impossible and theologically illegitimate. The God we meet in Christ is One who meets us *where we are* and transforms us within that context.

<sup>37</sup>Bloesch continues to use "masculine" and "feminine" instead of "male" and "female" in this book and to construe the former in terms of traditional Western middle-class stereotypes. Cf. pp. 32–3, 37.

teristic form of addressing God was *Abba*. However, two points must be noted in this regard. First, Christ also used numerous female images for God, often seeming to purposely *balance* a male image with a female image.<sup>38</sup> Second, it can be powerfully argued that one of Christ's main concerns in adopting the familiar (as contrasted with formal) term *Abba* was to *overcome* the patriarchal (traditional "masculine"!) elements in the understanding of God in his day.<sup>39</sup>

Another reason Bloesch suggests for considering male images of God as normative is that use of female imagery, or alternations between male and female imagery, is more likely to attribute sexuality to God than is the use of "generic" male language (p. 44).<sup>40</sup> Obviously, the logic of this argument is totally dependant upon whether male-normative language really functions generically—a very debated issue.<sup>41</sup>

Bloesch's final argument for treating male imagery for God as normative is the claim that the specific analogies for God of "Father," "Son" and "Lord" are analogies *sui generi*. They are not derived from the experience of human fatherhood but from God's act of revelation (pp. 45, 18). They are not *our* names for God but God's self-appellation (p. 25). (As contrasted, apparently, with the female *metaphors* for God.) Ultimately, this argument is a reformulation of the appeal to the "language of Canaan" in his first book. While tangential in that study, Bloesch now develops this appeal into the second major front in *The Battle for the Trinity*.

Indeed, the primary advance of Bloesch's second book over the first is that it addresses *directly* the issue of how, or whether, one can adopt alternative Christian feminist linguistic formulations and still affirm the primary authority of Scripture in matters of doctrine. This, in itself, increases the value of the second study for facilitating evangelical analyses of feminism, even if, as we shall argue, Bloesch's particular stance on this issue is problematic.

Bloesch's basic claim concerning this issue is that the feminists' desire to adopt more inclusive terms for God and/or seek a more equal balance of male and female images for God than found in the Bible itself *inherently* rejects the authority of Scripture, substituting as an authority their subjective human experience (p. 64). Clearly, behind this charge lie understandings of the nature of scriptural authority and the role of experience in theology whose adequacy must be examined.

Integral to anyone's affirmation of Scripture for norming Christian belief is their assumed model of divine revelation in general and the divine inspiration of Scripture as the definitive locus of this revelation in particular. What is Bloesch's

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 35ff.

<sup>39</sup>See especially Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

<sup>40</sup>See also Bloesch, "Reply," p. 43, pt. 7.

<sup>41</sup>One of the best surveys of this debate is *Sexist Language*, edited by Mary Vetterling-Braggin (Totowa, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1981).

model? It appears to be dangerously "docetic": i.e., to not take seriously enough the human side of the reception and conceptualization of revelation.

Indeed, at times Bloesch seems to approach a dictation method of inspiration where the very words and symbols of Scripture are seen as *entirely* God's formulation. In particular, he repeatedly argues that the choice of symbols used for God in Scripture was God's own, not a human choice (pp. 26, 95). More radically, he argues that the very content and meaning of these symbols is given *de novo* in God's act of revelation, not derived from human experience.<sup>42</sup> Surely, this undercuts any significant role for the experience, limitations or contributions of the human authors of the Bible.

Such a docetic view of Scripture is problematic for several reasons. In the first place, Scripture appears to claim for itself and manifest in its contents more of a role for human contributions and limitations than Bloesch acknowledges.<sup>43</sup> A more adequate (biblical!) model of inspiration would view Scripture as the product of divinely guided *human* attempts to express the revelation of God within the particular cultural settings of the authors and under the limitations of human intellectual and linguistic abilities.

Such a model would be more sensitive to limitations of human language for expressing the fullness of God's revelation than Bloesch appears to be (p. 11). It would also take the cultural influences on and input of the biblical authors more seriously than Bloesch.<sup>44</sup> While refusing to reduce Scripture to mere human opinions, it would focus on how God's revelation emerges within, takes forms appropriate to, critiques and transforms particular human expressions and beliefs in concrete human situations.

The obvious implication of such a view would be that the application of any truths of revelation to *other* human cultural settings (such as our own) would involve a process of distinguishing between the essential Word of God and the culturally specific aspects of the particular biblical expression of that Word.<sup>45</sup> In particular, it would address carefully the question whether the male-normative language and cultural patterns present in the Bible are part of the Word of God or, rather, descriptions of the sinful human situation to which this Word is addressed. Bloesch simply bypasses this process completely in his appeals to the "language of Canaan."

In short, the central problem with Bloesch's model of revelation is that it does not take the historical-situatedness of Scripture seriously enough. This

<sup>42</sup>One gets the impression Bloesch limits this claim to only the male or masculine images of God. However, if that is the case then we are again faced with the question of what criteria justify such a distinction.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Clark Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), pp. 85–152. This treatment is particularly relevant for evangelicals because Pinnock's increasing recognition of the human side of Scripture has come within their circles and in conversation with their issues.

<sup>44</sup>Note especially Bloesch's apparent (?) claim that the biblical prophets' use of patriarchal images had its source solely in God's revelation, not their cultural setting, and that the meanings they ascribed to these terms were totally different from the culturally typical meanings (pp. 39–40).

<sup>45</sup>See again footnote 7 above.

helps explain his tendency to disregard or undervalue historical-critical perspectives on the meaning of biblical symbols, especially "masculine" symbols.<sup>46</sup> It also helps explain why he does not seem to be adequately sensitive to how his "obvious" readings of texts might be heavily influenced by personal and cultural preunderstandings.

Bloesch is constantly attacking feminists for reading their ideology *into* biblical texts (pp. 58–60, xvi). By contrast, he apparently believes his own readings *approximate* a dispassionate, non-ideological reading of the text (pp. 82–83). We would agree with Hans-Georg Gadamer that such pretensions to presuppositionless interpretation simply blind the interpreter to their remaining presuppositions.<sup>47</sup> The way to deal with presuppositions in the interpretation of texts is not to try to "escape" them but to become conscious of them (through dialogue and the historical distanciation of the text) and then to critically test their adequacy *by playing them out*. As Bloesch himself notes, Christian feminists are quite conscious of the presuppositions they are bringing to their reading of the text. He considers this to be a weakness (p. 85). We would suggest it is a strength, provided that their goal is to assess the appropriateness and adequacy of those preunderstandings.<sup>48</sup>

Bloesch's charge that Christian feminists are imposing an unacceptable ideology on the Christian faith provides an appropriate setting for asking whether Bloesch is any more aware of or fair to the positions of *Christian* feminists in his second book. The evidence is mixed. On the one hand, he is more aware of the names of a variety of religious feminists, including Christian feminists. He even provides a typology that separates Christian feminists from post-Christian feminists (pp. 4–5).<sup>49</sup> However, we would suggest he still does not give adequate attention to (or take seriously enough) explicitly Christian feminists, particularly evangelical Christian feminists.

The evidence for this charge is three-fold. In the first place, Bloesch clearly believes that feminism in general does not speak for or represent the viewpoint of the majority of women.<sup>50</sup> As a result, he repeatedly cites non-feminist evangelical women as authoritative on the issues under consideration (pp. xvii, 3–4) but almost never quotes or dialogues with evangelical feminists.

Secondly, Bloesch continues the practice noted in his first book of attributing positions to Christian feminists that he only documents in post-Christian or

<sup>46</sup>To cite one example, Bloesch rejects the alternative translation of "Son of Man" as "The Human One" with the claim that "Son of Man" is an honorific title indicating a supernatural being, not a symbol for representative humanity. Many biblical scholars would disagree, but Bloesch does not even acknowledge there is a debate.

<sup>47</sup>For a summary of Gadamer's contribution to the problem of the hermeneutic circle, see Randy L. Maddox, "Hermeneutic Circle—Vicious or Victorious?" *Philosophy Today* 27 (1983): 66–76.

<sup>48</sup>For a discussion of the impact of recognizing the inevitability of presuppositions in interpretation on the authority of Scripture, see Randy L. Maddox, "Biblical Authority and Interpretation," *TSF Bulletin* 8.1 (1984–5): 5–8.

<sup>49</sup>Note, however, that the key criterion for his typology is simply whether they continue to use *traditional* language for God or not! See our analysis of this criterion below.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. Bloesch, "Reply," p. 43, pt. 3.

non-Christian feminists. For example, he charges that feminists, including some evangelicals, are drifting toward a goddess spirituality; then presents as his only evidence a speech by Jean Bolen, who makes no claim at all to be a Christian (p. 3). Or again, he argues that the adoption of female metaphors for God inevitably leads one to adopt an immanent (pantheistic) view of God, offering as evidence a quote from Starhawk, who is explicitly a non-Christian feminist (p. 44).

The third evidence that Bloesch fails to engage in a careful dialogue with Christian feminists in this study is his repeated use of negative and inflammatory comparisons to characterize their position. Among his favorite comparative models are the Gnostics, Baalism, the German Christian movement and (a current evangelical favorite) the New Age Movement (p. 90). It is noteworthy that even a sympathetic critic like Elizabeth Achtemeier considers some of these characterizations far-fetched.<sup>51</sup> While there are instances of agreement between feminists and some of these movements, sometimes on issues that merit real critique, these instances are typically tangential. As a result, Bloesch's comparisons raise much more heat than light.

Once again, the result of Bloesch's failure to dialogue adequately with Christian feminists is that he repeatedly makes accusations or characterizations that are misleading, if not totally inaccurate. Among examples noted already in his previous study are continued charges that Christian feminists adopt androgynous models of humanity (p. 58), affirm a literal view of God as female (p. xvii) and advocate the independence of women from men (p. xviii). Characteristic, in particular, of this second study are several questionable comparisons with other contemporary theological currents. To cite one example, Bloesch repeatedly suggests similarities between Christian feminists and process views of God. In reality, many Christian feminists are very uncomfortable with process views of God, for some of the same reasons that Bloesch suggests.<sup>52</sup>

There are two areas where Bloesch appears to misunderstand or distort Christian feminist positions that demand special attention. The first area is their understanding of the authority of Scripture in deciding issues of Christian doctrine and life. Bloesch's charge is that feminists make their personal experience "the final court of appeal" in all such issues (p. 57). This is far from true as a generalization. Many Christian feminists explicitly affirm Scripture as their primary authority and frequently appeal to the standard of the revelation of Christ to judge experience—including women's experience.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, it is significant that Bloesch misreads Rosemary Ruether when he

<sup>51</sup>She rightly rejects the identification with Gnosticism (p. xi), which most characteristically recommends the type of dualism that feminists are very concerned to overcome!

<sup>52</sup>Cf. Jean Porter, "The Feminization of God: Second Thoughts on the Ethical Implications of Process Theology," *St. Luke's Journal of Theology* 29 (1986): 251–60. Actually Bloesch's "sloppy" reading of current theological positions affects more than feminists. For example, Moltmann is much more open to the charge of being a tri-theist than of viewing God as bi-sexual or in a pantheistic mode (Cf. pp. 6, 91–2).

<sup>53</sup>For example, Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be*, p. 21; Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 70; and Diane Tennis, *Is God the Only Reliable Father?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), pp. 73ff.

attempts to illustrate his charge. As he notes, Ruether claims that human experience is the "starting point and ending point of the hermeneutic circle" (p. 57). That is, she argues that the *process* of theological reflection starts and ends in the sphere of human life.<sup>54</sup> However, she does *not* claim that the ultimate *criterion* of theological judgment is experience. Rather, experience needs to be judged by something more deeply rooted and reliable—a religious tradition.<sup>55</sup>

The other area where Bloesch's reading of the Christian feminists seems most suspect is in the claim that they are trying to reject the Christian understanding of God as triune while he is defending it. While some Christian feminists indeed approach a type of immanent pantheism (for example, Ruether), one of the most significant currents in recent Christian feminist thought is a deepening appreciation of the doctrine of the trinity, particularly in its Eastern Orthodox form.<sup>56</sup> The focus of this appreciation is the way in which the Eastern understanding of God as *fundamentally relational* grounds an understanding of humanity as also fundamentally relational; thereby helping overcome the individualistic and dualistic elements that have crept into Christian theology in the West from our "Greek" cultural milieu.

Seen in this light, it could be easily argued that what Bloesch is really defending against the Christian feminists are the abstract and hierarchal elements in the *traditional Western* view of the trinity—a view which many would suggest really amounts to a monarchial deism.<sup>57</sup> To be sure, Bloesch claims that God is *both* transcendent and immanent (pp. 29, 34). However, his stress is clearly on transcendence and hierarchy (p. 53). He repeatedly expresses discomfort with any balancing stress on the immanence of God (pp. 100, 105, 53). Likewise, Bloesch affirms the trinity in principle. However, he clearly conceives of it as a trinity of "function" in God, not a trinity of God's very being (p. 31). In all likelihood, he would accuse the alternative feminist (and Eastern Orthodox) formulations of being tri-theistic. Such a case is well worth arguing. However, our point would remain: this is not a battle between those who affirm the trinity and those who deny it. It is a battle between two equally traditional (!) models of the trinity.

This leads us to our last comment about Bloesch's second book. In his most translucent moments it becomes clear that what Bloesch is really defending is *tradition*. He defends traditional readings of Scripture. He defends traditional language about God.<sup>58</sup> He defends traditional hierarchal views of God.

<sup>54</sup>See the full quote in Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 12.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 18. While Ruether would see Scripture as just one part of this tradition (p. 21), her main point could easily be expressed in a more evangelical manner.

<sup>56</sup>See Maddox, "Inclusive Theology," pp. 12–13; and Barbara Brown Zikmund, "The Trinity and Women's Experience," *Christian Century* 104 (1987): 354–56.

<sup>57</sup>Note his choice of designations as a monarchial trinitarian in *Is the Bible Sexist?* p. 93. We would make the same claim about Elizabeth Achtemeier in "Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt it?" pp. 47–114 in *The Hermeneutical Quest*, edited by D. Miller (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1986). While she raises some important questions about the pantheistic elements of some Christian feminists, her alternative emphases seem to verge dangerously close to deism.

<sup>58</sup>It is no accident that his typology of feminists is organized around the question whether they accept traditional language for God! (pp. 5–6).

It is commendable to value tradition as Bloesch obviously does. However, we would agree with Jaroslav Pelikan that one must be very careful not to totally identify tradition with the truth it teaches (idolatry). Tradition is reliable but human and, thus, fallible. At times cultural elements can creep in that distort the essential revelation of which tradition is the *icon*.<sup>59</sup> Christian feminists are claiming that this is the case with regard to the individualistic and hierarchal elements in the traditional (especially Western) view of God. They believe they are calling us back to the true revelation of Christ. Such a call deserves to be examined on its exegetical and theoretical merits, not rejected simply because it would call into question the adequacy of current tradition.

### Conclusions

Our survey of the books by Bloesch and Oddie has given us a sense of some of the crucial issues at stake in the evangelical dialogue with the Christian feminist critique. It has also illustrated for us some of the pitfalls and passions of that dialogue. Are there any lessons we can draw from this exposure which might help guide the ongoing dialogue in a more fruitful and faithful manner? We would suggest seven points, all dealing with the need to make distinctions.

1. Interests of fairness and truth call us to distinguish carefully between those feminists who self-consciously claim to be Christian and those who do not. One may want to question the adequacy of their "Christian" formulations, but we should at least read them on their own terms.

2. It is important to distinguish between what Christian feminists (or any theologian!) *reject* and what they *affirm*. All too often it is *assumed* that if feminists reject a particular position they must be affirming its polar opposite. Such is often not the case!<sup>60</sup>

3. We should not assume we have to accept everything a particular theologian says just because we find some elements of truth in their work (or vice versa). Rather, we should distinguish between what seems valid and what does not.

4. It is crucial to distinguish between theological language (for God or otherwise) that is intended as literal and that which is affirmed as analogical.

5. It is important to distinguish between physical gender characteristics which are based on biological realities and sexual role-types which are based on cultural norms. To use a male image for God is not necessarily to attribute "masculine" characteristics to God. Such characteristics vary by cultures.

6. It is necessary, in order to do justice to the situation-relatedness of Scripture, to distinguish between the Word of God *per se* and the culturally specific

<sup>59</sup>Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 55.

<sup>60</sup>To cite one further example, Achtemeier ("Female Language," p. 98) assumes that since Christian feminists reject the exclusive use of male terms for God they must desire an exclusive use of female terms—which she believes would necessarily lead them to a pantheistic view of God (p. 108). Actually, most Christian feminists advocate a balance of male and female terms, which (by the logic of her argument) would support a classic theist view of God!

aspects of the particular biblical expressions of that Word; in other words, to distinguish between what Scripture *teaches* and what it merely *describes*.

7. Finally, we would suggest that one of the most crucial distinctions that any theologian makes in using Scripture as a norm is *how* one remains faithful to the model of Christ. Even most traditionalist exegetes admit that Christ challenged elements of his patriarchal culture and worked to provide a greater degree of freedom and worth to women in his day. What does this model warrant for us today? Should we be content to remain at the point where Christ arrived, changing nothing else? Or, should we continue to *move in the direction Christ was moving*, tackling areas of injustice and oppression that he had neither the time nor opportunity to address? Christian feminists clearly opt for the second model.

DISCUSSIONS

## Reply to Randy Maddox

By Donald G. Bloesch

281

Because the recent issue of *Christian Scholar's Review* on feminism did not include an evangelical critique of feminist theology, I thought it might be helpful to the reader for me to redress the imbalance by offering some observations on Randy Maddox's evaluation of my books *Is the Bible Sexist?* and *The Battle for the Trinity*.

Maddox sees a discrepancy between my recent books on language about God and my *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*. There has been no change. In the sacramental view of Scriptural authority, which I continue to uphold, a distinction is made between form and content but the two are regarded as inseparable. Therefore, the language of the Bible concerning God, while not exhausting the mystery of divinity, is the ordained avenue by which we come to meet diversity. My position here is fully in accord with that of Calvin, Luther, and Barth. It is this same high view of biblical authority that leads me to support the ordination of women, as I explain in *Is the Bible Sexist?*

While Maddox labels my position a "reformed patriarchy" (I have acknowledged that I could just as well be called a "biblical feminist"), I have indicated a marked preference in my book *Is the Bible Sexist?* for the term "covenantalism" because the relationship of God to humankind as well as the relationship of man and woman in Christian marriage is based on a covenant of grace. To be sure, man's representative headship within the family is endorsed, since this is clearly Pauline and New Testament teaching (as even feminists agree), but I have pointed out that male headship is realized in a quite different way from headship in patriarchal societies. With Christ as his example the husband realizes his headship in the role of a servant, sacrificing himself for the good of his family in the manner of Christ's sacrifice for his church (see Eph. 5:22-23).

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In his article, "The Necessity of Recognizing Distinctions: Lessons from the Evangelical Critique of Christian Feminist Theology" (*CSR* XVII:3, pp. 307-323), Randy L. Maddox engages in critical discussion of two books by Donald G. Bloesch. In this reply Donald Bloesch reaffirms and clarifies his "covenantal" understanding of man-woman relationships, and in the process underscores his criticisms of a number of the feminist theologians discussed by Maddox. Mr. Bloesch teaches theology at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary.

It is true that subordination is implied in this model of male-female relations, but this is not a servile subordination, which is enervating and degrading, but a revolutionary subordination which is rejuvenating and liberating (see John Howard Yoder's *Politics of Jesus*). In the biblical perspective, subordination is not imposed on man and woman but is offered to them as an opportunity for service. Subordination is an invitation to participate in the trials and joys of the kingdom, not a curse that must be combatted by self-affirmation (as in feminist ideology). Maddox does the reader a signal disservice by not acknowledging the revolutionary character of biblical headship and subordination, which is clearly set forth in my book.

Maddox argues that I have not sufficiently investigated the writings of Christian feminists. On the contrary, I have read and continue to read such prolific and stimulating writers as Sallie McFague, Rosemary Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, Letty Russell, Virginia Mollenkott, and Dorothee Sölle. I see in them as I do in the post-Christian feminists a slide toward pantheism and panentheism. When Sallie McFague in her latest book *Models of God* describes nature as "the body of God," this can only blur the infinite qualitative difference between God and creation. Elizabeth Achtemeier even sees in such a theology a new religious idolatry: "The primary error in most of the feminist theologies — such as McFague's — being written today is that they once again want to blur the difference between God and his creation. If they prevail, we shall, once again, as Paul says, worship the creature and creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25)" (*Presbyterian Outlook*, March 14, 1988, p. 2).

Maddox does not really understand Rosemary Ruether if he believes her position can be reconciled with that of evangelical Christianity. Ruether argues that the biblical Hebraic traditions which are transmitted to us through the Bible need to be corrected by Baalistic, Canaanite religion if they are to serve in the formation of a church that is truly inclusive. In her more recent book *Woman-guides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* she calls for a new canon, which would include in addition to the Bible the writings of Goddess religions, Gnosticism, and contemporary feminism.

Maddox claims that my hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures fails to take account of the fact that everyone brings to Scripture certain theological and philosophical presuppositions. I do indeed recognize this problem but hold that we should endeavor to disengage ourselves from these presuppositions as much as possible. At one time I was inclined to read the Bible through the lens of existentialist presuppositions, but I now see the danger in that approach. We can never come to the Bible without any presuppositions whatsoever, but we need to subordinate these to the living Word of God, and let this Word recast and sometimes overturn these presuppositions. Feminists like Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza believe that the Bible should be read through the lens of a cultural ideology. I see ideology as an obstacle to the right understanding of Scripture, and while not claiming an ideologically free perspective, I think we as theologians should strive for this as much as possible.

I am fully in favor of the movement for women's rights in society and for the dignity and equality of man and woman before God. I have been a vigorous critic of the patriarchal mentality for some time because of its tendency to denigrate the accomplishments of woman. Sexism is a sin whether promoted by a patriarchal or a feminist mind-set. (Sexism also exists in feminism where men are frequently downgraded or where women who choose a vocation of motherhood are devalued.) What I do oppose is aligning biblical faith with a particular ideology, such as feminism, and thereby blurring the role of God as Creator and Redeemer. It is not women's liberation but goddess spirituality that needs to be combatted in the church, and a growing number of young evangelicals are becoming alert to this danger.

Everyone interested in this discussion should read Roland Frye's *Language for God and Feminist Language*, recently issued by the Center of Theological Inquiry, 50 Stockton Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540. Sections of this essay are scheduled to be published in the *Scottish Journal of Theology and Interpretation* magazines. Frye presents a convincing case that "mother similes" in the Bible cannot be ranked on the same level as "Father metaphors," for Father, Son, and Spirit are the self-designated names for God. I also urge the readers of *Christian Scholar's Review* to study Paul Minear's excellent critique of the new *UCC Book of Worship* in the Spring 1988 issue of *Prism* in which he shows how the movement toward inclusive God-language in the church today is dismantling the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. Paul Minear, a distinguished UCC clergyman, is widely considered an authority on the language of the Bible (see his brilliant study *Images of the Church in the New Testament*).

It is now becoming more fully recognized in both feminist and nonfeminist circles that feminism in its contemporary form is indebted to Gnosticism and that feminist theology can legitimately be seen at least in part as a rebirth of a Gnostic mentality. Sharon Zanter Ross, Associate Pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Irving, Texas, who considers herself a biblical feminist, has this astute comment: "Against those who present themselves as being 'for women' in the Church: perhaps the most telling feature is their tendency to promote women as idealized selves. This should come as no surprise when one remembers the movement's roots in Christian liberalism. Women, we are told, are the recipients of special divine knowledge (*extra ecclesia*) merely because we are women. Our interpretation of scripture is therefore above criticism and our inner knowledge is more important than that held by the community. . . . The characteristics of this brand of feminism bear striking resemblance to the ancient heresy of gnosticism. This gnosticism cannot find support in the true Gospel, so it must manufacture artificial quotas in its quest for power. (How tired I am of being asked to perform priestly tasks for no other reason than 'We need a woman to. . . !' How insulting to the Spirit who visits us at ordination with gifts for ministry!) It . . . must reject anything which sounds even remotely 'male,' since what is considered male can only be less than the idealized female" (*Forum Letter*, June 26, 1988, pp. 7-8). Again, it should be noted that Rosemary Ruether,

284 who regards herself as a reformist feminist, wishes to include Gnostic writings in a new canon. Also see Pheme Perkins, "Sophia and the Mother-Father: the Gnostic Goddess," in *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present* (ed. Carl Olson, Crossroad); and Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

To advocate a "balance of male and female terms" for God (as Maddox does) is to create the impression that God is bisexual rather than Trinitarian. This again is the route of Gnosticism (see Samuel Laeuchli, *The Language of Faith*, pp. 15–93), and it can only end in a dilution of the Father symbol and the subversion of the Trinitarian name for God—Father, Son, and Spirit.

Maddox most seriously misreads me when he attributes to me a functional rather than an ontological understanding of the Trinity. It is precisely the feminists who drift into modalism when they seek to substitute such symbolism as "Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer" for "Father, Son, and Spirit." To call God "Father-Mother" makes God binitarian rather than Trinitarian.

Doubtless Maddox wishes to remain true to Scripture, but he needs to realize that his appeal is to a vision of God and the world that is closer to androgyny than to biblical hierarchy (as opposed to patriarchal hierarchy). It is the "direction [in which] Christ was moving" rather than the New Testament assessment of who Christ is that forms the basis of his judgments. It is not the Christ of Scripture to whom church tradition bears witness but the Christ who is imposed on Scripture by the winds of modern culture that shapes his feminist theology.

I am hopeful about the future, for I see feminists such as Martha Stortz, Mary Stewart Van Lecuwen, Ruth Tucker, and Sharon Zanter Ross becoming more critical of ideas alien to the gospel that now form a part of feminist ideology and theology. Those who defend the traditional values of patriarchalism are also raising questions that could threaten their ideology. If God is neither male nor female, then how is God best described in our day? Does the Bible really sanction the patriarchal ethos even though the revelation of God is set in such an ethos? In my book *Is the Bible Sexist?* I have tried to show that the biblical view should not be confounded with either patriarchalism or feminism.

I hope that this discussion will contribute to bridge-building between conflicting ideological parties in the church and perhaps even lead to the emergence of a new vision of man-woman relations that is fully consonant with the biblical revelation.

## Reply to Donald Bloesch

By Randy L. Maddox

I want to thank Donald Bloesch for his response to my review of his recent books on feminist issues. This kind of serious debate about the issues involved is precisely what is needed. At the same time, since it is a debate, I must respond to some of his clarifications and counter-charges.

First, Bloesch suggests some uncomfortableness with "my" labeling of his position as "reformed patriarchalism." I must remind him I was quoting *his* description of his position. My title of choice was "liberated traditionalism." The more serious issue here is his protest that his appeal to "covenantalism" is a significant alternative to patriarchalism because of its endorsement of "revolutionary subordinationism." Contrary to his charge, I did mention that point in my review. However, he is right that I did not stress it. The reason is that I do not believe he takes seriously enough what is precisely the most distinctive element of the revolutionary subordinationism. Comparative treatments of Jesus' model and Paul's household codes with those of the larger Jewish and Hellenistic culture highlight that what is *distinctive* is the call for *mutual* submission (thus, Eph. 5:21, which is part of Paul's household code). However much Bloesch takes the "edge" off of male-headship, he ultimately holds onto the principle that when agreement between the partners is not possible, the male must decide. I do not find such "subordinationism" truly revolutionary. While I agree strongly with Bloesch's point that the call of God to self-subordinating service to God and others is a crucial and distinctive element of the Christian view, I believe it is a call addressed *equally* to males and females in all areas of life.

Second, Bloesch protests my suggestion that his earlier writings had a more discerning distinction between the content and form of Scripture than the works under consideration. If so, I am guilty of an unduly positive reading of his earlier work! My problem with Bloesch's appeal to the "Language of Canaan" in defense of patriarchal language and culture is not that I think he is trying to "exhaust the mystery of divinity." Rather, it is the apparent arbitrariness of the appeal. In particular, the "chosen culture" (Bloesch's term) for the biblical revelation was not only patriarchal, but also a slave society with a monarchial government. Now, Bloesch does not (and, I believe, would not want to) defend the

latter two social structures as essential to the Christian revelation or normative for all later Christians. However, he does want to defend (however "modified") patriarchalism. My question is what criteria he uses for distinguishing which elements of the "chosen culture" remain normative and which do not (i.e., why can the Church "move on" in the direction Christ was moving for the issues of slavery and democracy, but not patriarchy?). He never tells us. (Hopefully the books he recommends do!) One cannot help but wonder whether he defends only the latter because only the latter is characteristic of *our present* culture! Perhaps he is as liable to imposing a Christ shaped by the winds of modern culture upon the Bible as he believes me to be.

Obviously, this last comment leads directly to the issue of the role of preunderstandings in hermeneutical and theological reflection. Bloesch is clearly sensitive to this issue (I never claimed otherwise), and shares *my* concern that Christians not allow their preunderstandings to control and distort the Word of God. Where we differ is in our recommendations for how to pursue this end. Bloesch continues to hold up the *ideal* of the individual interpreter approximating an ideologically free perspective. I do not believe that this is possible *individually*. Rather, I follow Gadamer in suggesting the best way to help neutralize the distorting effects of preunderstandings is within a *community* of discourse where the various participants *play out* their reading of Scripture in light of their preunderstandings. As this takes place, some readings will be exposed as incapable of convincingly dealing with the whole of Scripture. Others will be modified by dialogue with the persuasive insights of alternative readings. Only through such dialogue can we hope to subordinate our readings to the living Word of God. As such, my willingness to listen to the Christian feminist readings of Scripture along with those of Bloesch and even radical antifeminists is to give opportunity for the full range of insights and implications of the positions to emerge. I do not argue (or believe) that the Christian feminist reading is the final authoritative one, but I do appreciate their self-conscious recognition that they are contributing a reading that operates from a set of preunderstandings. I simply wish the other participants in the debate were as self-aware. Then maybe the process of listening to each other *honestly* and *critically* could really begin.

If such honest and critical dialogue is to take place, surely one of the prerequisites is to respect the distinctiveness of the various participants in the debate. On this point I continue to find Bloesch's summaries and analysis of the Christian feminist position lacking. The issue is not whether he has read several Christian feminist writers, but how he argues his case against them. It is my contention that he all too often summarizes as a "uniform feminist position" a controversial point about which there is great disagreement among Christian feminists—all the time without mentioning the disagreement. More importantly, he usually chooses for summary the contingent in the debate that is the most radical. Indeed, he often resorts to quoting explicitly non-Christian feminists to display the "Christian feminist position." The group that is consistently ignored in his quotes is the "biblical" or "evangelical" Christian feminists like Bilezikian, Scanzoni and Hardesty, etc. Bloesch's case might actually be strengthened if he

would admit that these folks, who he may disagree with elsewhere, share his concern about some features of other Christian or post-Christian feminism. Of course, then he would have to admit that Christian feminists are actually a diverse lot!

Bloesch's response to my review provides a good illustration of his tendency to "over-read" statements. He suggests I believe that Rosemary Ruether's position can be reconciled with that of evangelical Christianity. He then points out her recent book *Womanguides*, which speaks quite favorably of Goddess religion, as evidence that such reconciliation is impossible. Note, however, that I made no reference to this or other of her very recent work (which I also find problematic). More importantly, I never suggested in any way that Ruether's position *as a whole* should be accepted by evangelicals or other Christian feminists. I dealt with Ruether specifically twice (cf. CSR XVIII:3, p. 321). First, I pointed out that while Ruether makes experience the starting point of theological reflection she does not make it the ultimate criterion—as Bloesch charged—rather, she appeals to a religious tradition. (Note that in the footnote I suggest dissatisfaction with Ruether's identification of this criterion!) Second, I noted that Ruether does tend toward a type of immanent pantheism, but then point out that there are other Christian feminists who are uncomfortable with this (myself included!) and have found more help in the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. I fail to see how this discussion suggests I believe Ruether's overall position is reconcilable with an evangelical position. I pointed out two places it is not! What I was asking for in the original review was a more distinguishing reading of alternative positions that would avoid this type of misleading generalization.

Having made such a request, let me clarify a misunderstanding. My choice of terms suggests to Bloesch that I believe he affirms a "functional rather than an ontological understanding of the Trinity." That is not what I intended. My overall point in that context was that the debate between Bloesch and many Christian feminists is not really one between those who affirm the Trinity and those who do not. Rather, it is the current form of a long-standing Christian difference over how to conceive and explain the Trinity. Bloesch is representative the Western Christian approach which, since Augustine, has started with the assumption of the *unity* of God and then struggled to find ways to do justice to the distinctness of the Persons. The worst fear of this tradition is tri-theism, and that is what I meant in the comment about focussing trinity language on the "functions" of God rather than the being. My phrase was poorly chosen. However, my essential point was that many Christian feminists are as concerned to defend the Trinity as Bloesch—albeit, they see the Eastern Christian approach to Trinity as being more helpful. This tradition starts with the assumption of the *distinctness* of the Persons and then struggles to find ways to do justice to the unity of God (through *perichoresis*, for example). Christian feminists find such an understanding of Trinity more biblical and more affirming of the communal nature of all of life than the Western approach. As such, it is not a Battle for the Trinity, but a battle over understandings of the Trinity!

There are two points where I find Bloesch still failing to distinguish *among* Christian feminists. First, he continues to argue that Christian feminism nearly universally endorses a move to pantheism. I can only refer back to my original footnotes to document that many Christian feminists have expressed clear critiques of such a move. At the same time, Bloesch's (and Achtemeier's) strong reactions to the pantheistic tendencies of some Christian feminists (and most post-Christian feminists) so emphasize the transcendence and otherness of God that they are more suggestive of deism than of classical theism. I would suggest that a truly discerning dialogue on this issue may be a way of giving new life to an authentically theistic view of God as both distinct from yet intimately involved in creation.

Second, Bloesch's charge that I construe God as "bisexual" or that Christian feminists are classically Gnostic fails to understand our stress on the *analogical* nature of God-language. I expressly said that God transcends the human distinctions of gender. This is not to make God *partly* male and *partly* female or bisexual. It is to say that the distinction of sexuality does not exist in the Godhead. It does exist, however, in human creation. (Thus, I do not teach androgyny and neither do most Christian feminists—contrary to his suggestion.) Christian feminists want to defend both male and female *language* for God as biblical and as providing important disclosures of truth about God. They do not, however, argue that God is in any literal way male *or* female. Now, the Gnostics often did attribute sexuality to God (or the Gods)—in a dualistic manner. On this issue I see Bloesch actually more reminiscent of the Gnostics in that he is concerned to defend at least a core of "maleness" in God; i.e., he is the one who appears to attribute sexuality to God—as did the Gnostics—not me.

Finally, I note that Bloesch contributed his response because he believed an evangelical critique of feminist theology had been missing in the original issue of *CSR*. While not without its critical comments, I admit my piece was not primarily a critique of the Christian feminists. That should not be taken as evidence I do not believe such a critique is necessary or helpful. Quite the contrary! There is much in general feminist ideology and in many Christian feminist appropriations of this ideology that demands careful critical reflection in light of the Gospel. Among such issues I would include with Bloesch the suggestions by *some* of androgyny, pantheism, the idealizing of the female as above the distortions of original sin, and exclusivist feminist models of society and church. However, the most serious present obstacle to such a critical interaction is that the initial evangelical critiques have so caricatured and marginalized the Christian feminist positions that truly meaningful debate cannot yet take place. Hopefully, dialogues like this one will help to overcome this obstacle and bring about the type of constructive and critical interchange that will enable us all to approach truly *inclusive* understandings of Christian belief and models of Christian life. Thus I, like Dr. Bloesch, remain hopeful for the present!