

Women's space

by [Gwenette Robertson](#) in the [November 22, 2000](#) issue

*Feminist Theology and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, by Serene Jones

The history of feminist theology may be read as a feisty conversation between feminist theory and Christian theology, a conversation that traditionally has emphasized the contributions feminism can and should bring to a Christian vision of the world. Serene Jones continues this creative dialogue in a book that is part of the series "Guides to Theological Inquiry."

Her most important contribution to feminist theology, however, is her assertion that the history of Christian doctrine has something to offer feminist theory. Jones's personal history as a participant in both feminist communities of women and the Christian community of the church has made her a dual ambassador, a skilled defender of both projects.

Christian theology offers feminist theory an unabashed willingness to construct ideal imaginative spaces and a pragmatic approach to reaching those ideals. Christian theologies and feminist theories both make normative claims about how human identity is formed, how human failure should be addressed, and how human relationships are to be ordered. The church, however, has a long history of trying to balance eschatological vision with a less than ideal reality. This is a history from which feminist theory can learn.

Jones outlines a relationship between feminist approaches to women's nature, oppression and community and theological approaches to Christian identity, sin and the church. While many images help her build this relationship of ideas, the overarching metaphor is that of life as a creative performance--one that humans are thrust into--including a character, a script and the actor's choice about how to play the role.

Jones begins by addressing the problem of women's nature--what does it mean to be a woman? This question is integral to the feminist project. Feminists' first responses inevitably involve a critique of the received idea of female identity, a critique often experienced as both liberating and destabilizing. Jones finds in Christian theology an

imaginative construct that empowers women to approach without fear the reconstruction of their identity.

After navigating the difficult terrain of feminist debates between essentialist and constructivist theories of gender--that is, theories which insist upon an "essential" difference between men and women, and theories which insist that the feminine and the masculine are socially "constructed" myths--she articulates a middle ground between these two positions, which she calls "strategic essentialism." Strategic essentialism is distinctively pragmatic. It is "essentialist" or "constructivist" to whatever extent these positions are useful to feminism's pragmatic goals--goals grounded in women's flourishing, whatever that may mean for an individual woman or community of women.

From this pragmatic middle ground Jones moves into one of theology's imaginative constructs: the script Luther provides of the sinner standing before the judgment seat of God. Jones finds Luther's script inadequate for the feminist project. Luther speaks of the arrogance and pride of the sinner, who needs to be stripped of his pretensions and judged in order to be forgiven and clothed in the body of Christ. Jones critiques this account of the human situation with help from Luce Irigaray's idea that women's problem is not pride, arrogance and rigidity but fluidity. Women, because of their constructed space in society, need containment, skin, an "envelope," so they don't bleed and dissolve into their relationships. "If she is to be able to contain, to envelop, she must have her own envelope. Not only her clothing and ornaments of seduction, but her skin."

Jones concludes that Luther's script needs to be rewritten. A woman cannot even stand before God to be judged and forgiven until God has clothed her in the skin of Christ.

The image of Christ's masculine body clothing the inadequately contained woman is at first jarring. But doctrine is most powerful when its images are fluid enough to adequately contain its spirit, and Christians familiar with feminist theology will recognize the potential of radical incarnationalism to reimagine Christ in feminine terms--if it chooses to be a pragmatic and functional doctrine. In this case, surely the God who accommodates herself to the body of a particular human being in Christ is able to accommodate herself to the particular human body of a woman.

This capacity of doctrine to accommodate pragmatic goals makes it useful to feminist theory, which like Christian theology is easily blinded by the unanswerability of the questions it is daring to ask. Jones makes the same assertion in the second portion of her book, when comparing feminist "doctrines" of oppression to Calvinist doctrines of sin. Calvin's image of the "false performative script," which he uses to explain original sin, provides a useful way of understanding both the structural "sins" of oppression, from which we cannot extricate ourselves, and the reality of human agency in our individual "sins" of oppression, for which we are fully responsible.

Calvin even offers a powerful image of sin "despoiling" the human body "stripped of its skin," much the way Irigaray imagines the female body "stripped of its skin," in need of an "envelope." In Calvin, the "false performative script" is replaced through sanctification by a graced performative script, another way of imagining the possibility of playing differently our roles in the oppressive structures into which we are born, just as the grace which clothes the justified sinner provides her with "boundaries, limits and integrity."

Finally, Jones addresses feminist and Christian theories of community. The image of the performative script remains central amid the varied, rich images of this section. As Jones wades through the muddy waters of liberal and communitarian views of human relationship, she suggests that the "third way" of "bounded openness" is realized, in all its messiness, perhaps most creatively in the church. The church reenacts the performative script of its history every Sunday through its word and liturgy. The church seeks actively to live out its eschatological vision in pragmatic ways through concrete acts of service and nurture. But above all, the church "performs" itself into existence as an intentional community of grace each time that a person chooses to participate in its pageant of community. While most churchgoers will testify that there is nothing ideal or glamorous about this "performance," it does create a particular, rare kind of community.

Jones admits that the church is not currently a space "in which women, in all their diversity, can be safe and flourish." But she adds, "I have also come to see, along with many other feminists, that opportunities to live in intentional and diverse communities are few and far between. The church remains one such place."