A Theology of Wonder

Malinda Elizabeth Berry

Introduction

The other weekend some friends and I wandered into a conversation about theology. The pressing question was this: What does it mean to "think theologically"? This past semester, one of my courses was a study of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and so with Barth on the brain, I answered the question by saying that thinking theologically means engaging in a kind of God-talk that takes revelation seriously because one believes that the Living Christ changes one's perception of reality. That was easy enough. But one of my conversation partners was dissatisfied. He did not see how thinking theologically is any different from his normal thought patterns as a committed Christian who tries to treat others as he would want to be treated, showing kindness and compassion to everyone he encounters. "That's thinking *ethically*," I countered. But after several more minutes of the same thing, we recognized we were at an impasse. I cannot say that I gained any great insights from that conversation, but now I do have a stronger conviction that as Anabaptist Christians we need to be much more self-conscious about thinking theologically. We need to think both about what theology *is* and how we *do* theology.

In his survey of Western Christianity's understanding of the theologian's task, Robert King observes,

> The [theological] tradition we have received has evolved over time, and we ourselves contribute to its further development by the way in which we appropriate and apply it. We had therefore best take responsibility for what we say and the way in which we say it. That is especially true if what we seek is a "systematic theology," for whatever else that term may mean, it surely connotes a deliberate ordering of ideas, the self-conscious articulation of a theological position.[1]

Malinda Elizabeth Berry is a doctoral student at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

The last part of this quotation is important to me because I am working on a degree in theology at a seminary that calls this concentration systematic theology (as opposed to biblical, dogmatic, fundamental, and practical theologies). Systematics places a priority on working through theological questions and issues in a systematic way. A concise definition says: "Systematic theology is the intellectual discipline that seeks to express the content of a religious faith as a coherent body of propositions."[2] Making sense of the biblical witness, church history, and human experience by using them to give an account of what we believe and how we describe the nature of our faith and the commitments that flow from our belief: this is what I call the task and goal of systematic theology. We now turn to a brief survey of the Christian tradition.

The Place of Tradition

The Patristic Period (c. 100–451)

The beginning of a systematizing process in theological reflection can be traced back to the second and third centuries with the work of Justin Martyr (c. 100–c. 165), Irenaeus (c. 130–c.200), Origen (c. 185–c.254), and Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225). Then in the fourth century, significant theological work was being done by Athanasius (c. 296–c. 373) and Augustine (354–430) in the West and to the East, the Cappadocian fathers: Basil of Caesarea (c. 300–379), Gregory of Nazianzen (329–389), and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330–c. 395). With the goal of addressing Greek philosophy, making clear distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable Christian teachings, and outlining the first systems of Christian doctrine, these men charted the course for sustained reflection on Christianity and its teachings. In their appeals to scripture and dialogues with philosophical viewpoints, these "church fathers" were engaged in debates about the nature of the church, the nature of Jesus Christ, the implications of the Constantinization of Christianity, the teachings deemed heretical, and eventually the division of the church into the East and the West. Their approach to doing theology was confessional and apologetic: they produced statements to provide the church with thoughtful treatises that justified Christian faith in the face of critics and detractors.

Of the theologians named above, it was Augustine who had the most impact on the direction of Western Christian thought. King identifies four

features of Augustine's theologizing that are part of the paradigm he calls the "Augustinian synthesis": (1) the use of a narrative structure to interpret history as a story that includes both the history of a particular people and their place in the history of the wider world – God is the one who determines the outcome of that story or sacred history; (2) reliance on the principle of God's divine sovereignty and its connection to governance, intervention, and causality; (3) dividing history into specific periods of time and describing revelation as something that has happened in the past; and (4) Augustine's belief that the theologian's task is to generate a systematized theology composed of doctrines that deal with "the major moments or motifs in this sacred history."[3]

The Middle Ages (c. 1000–c. 1500)

Augustine's principle of theology as "faith seeking understanding" was foundational for Medieval theologians like Anselm of Canterbury (c.1033–1109), Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308), William of Ockham (c. 1285–1347), and Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1469–1536). They represent the scholastic and humanist strains of theology that built on the Augustinian tradition. In addition to working with the biblical texts, these thinkers incorporated Aristotelian philosophy into their answers to questions and issues raised in their context. The human power to reason gained new importance as logic and metaphysics became the main way one established presuppositions for doing theology. Thomas Aquinas clearly exemplifies this methodological approach in his voluminous *Summa Theologiae*.

Some serious implications of this heightened attention to reason are worth mentioning. First, reason becomes a portal through which we can *know* certain things about God (i.e., traits like omnipotence, omniscience, eternity) while we can apprehend things about God's characteristics and activities through revelation (God's self-disclosure) that leads to higher knowledge (i.e., Trinitarian nature of God's being, creation of the world, rationale for hierarchies). Second, this revealed knowledge of God is the perfection of all knowledge. Third, and most problematic from a feminist perspective, there is a hierarchy of reason that corresponds to a hierarchy of being, and we all know where women end up in this kind of scheme! I am not arguing against the use of reason in theological reflection. Indeed, developed, sound reason is a vital part of any kind of reflection. I am alerting us to some historical assumptions about who has the best capacity to reason and how that capacity is measured.

The Reformation (c. 1500–c. 1700)

The sixteenth century was the age of religious reform in Europe. The theological motivation behind much of this reform activity was to give witness to personal faith experiences interpreted through the Bible, not to build systems based on reasoned metaphysical arguments. Martin Luther (1483–1546) argued and preached for an understanding of the biblical message that salvation comes only from God. It does not come from good works; rather salvation is found through justification. John Calvin (1509–1564), the leading reformer in Geneva, assembled a systematic theology, the *Institutes of Christian Religion.* Following the outline of the Apostles' Creed, he used Augustine's understanding of history as salvation history (a motif downplayed by medieval theologians) to discuss God, who is creator and sovereign; Christ, who is mediator and redeemer; the Holy Spirit, who does the work of justifying and sanctifying; and the church as it relates to civil society.

Because of the persecution, suppression, and martyrdom that Anabaptists experienced, they did not have the opportunity to make an academic contribution to theology in the same way Luther and Calvin (and, to a lesser extent, Ulrich Zwingli [1484–1531]) did. What can be noted are the core critiques of and alternative understandings to other reformers that Anabaptists taught. C. Arnold Snyder identifies elements of an Anabaptist core despite the many and varied expressions of Anabaptism throughout continental Europe at the time. First, the sixteenth-century Anabaptists were theologically orthodox, which meant that they accepted Christendom's creeds and symbols. Second, they shared the views and reforming impulses of others regarding the sacraments, clergy (priesthood of all believers), the authority of scripture *(sola scriptura),* and the importance of "salvation by grace through faith" *(sola gracia, sola fide).* Third, there was also a cluster or core of distinctively Anabaptist doctrinal emphases[4]:

1. a pneumatology (belief about the activity of the Holy Spirit) emphasizing the internal working of the Spirit that inspired and sustained the life of faith;
2. a sense that divine authority is found both in the Spirit and Letter of scripture (*sola scriptura* with a pneumatological emphasis);
3. a soteriology (belief about salvation) whereby "the faith that would lead to salvation was a faith that bore visible fruit in repentance, conversion, regeneration, obedience, and a new life dedicated to the love of God and the neighbour"[5];

4. a belief in a disciple's relationship to the inner working of the Holy Spirit that leads to fruitful living (faith and works);
5. an anthropology based on principles of free will, yieldedness *(Gelassenheit)*, and grace; and
6. an ecclesiology (beliefs about the nature of the church) that held strongly to the church as the visible body of Christ, adult water baptism upon confession of faith, church discipline (the ban), celebration of the Lord's Supper as a commitment to loving the neighbor as the self, and mutual aid.

Contemporary Mennonite scholars do not all agree on the historical accuracy of this core or what it means for us theologically.[6] Given this debate, I have a question for you to ponder: How much are these distinctives part of your identity as an Anabaptist woman in the twenty-first century?

The Modern Era (c. 1700–the present)

Along with the Enlightenment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, movements that have heavily influenced the modern era include colonization and imperialism, romanticism, Marxism, liberalism, modernism, fundamentalism, freedom movements, feminism, and postmodernism, to name just a few. The Enlightenment had a huge impact on the world of ideas, and today we still struggle with the burdensome legacy inherited from the so-called "dead white European men." This era saw the rise of the scientific worldview that laughed at miracles, modern philosophy that turned from the known world to the knowing subject, and a new historical consciousness that sought to deal only in the verifiable facts of history.

In response, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) offered Christians a new paradigm for doing theology and understanding themselves in relationship to God. The primary principle and starting point was not sacred or salvation history but what he called religious self-consciousness. This principle involves an awareness of our absolute dependence on God, the ethical implications of faith as we are in relationship with others, and the interplay of these two types of consciousness. For Schleiermacher, not every doctrine included in a previous system need be included in a contemporary formulation or account of the Christian faith.[7]

G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) developed a philosophical system that helped transform the understanding of history from time into a concept. History has

become a dynamic, dialectical process marked by struggle, conflict, risk, and movement toward a higher end. Hegel argued that Adam and Eve's fall from paradise did not happen as provable, historical fact; rather the story represents the truth about humankind and the universal condition of history: our lives and struggle come from our sense of alienation, a theme later reinterpreted by Karl Marx.[8]

Both Schleiermacher and Hegel contributed to systematizing theology. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), on the other hand, was opposed to trying to neatly manage Christianity in a system. Religious truth, he believed, is primarily subjective and therefore is only found when one turns inward. To take the "leap of faith" is to make a passionate choice for personal commitment. Nothing, not rational arguments, metaphysical systems, or dialectics of history can change the fact of this choice. This line of argument leads to the "subjective turn" of theology. Rather than trying to justify the faith, theology's task is to clarify the commitment to and prepare the way for faith.[9]

My cursory survey shows what the Christian tradition has meant by "thinking theologically." I have not mentioned the varieties of liberation theologies, because I want us to understand that the tradition is still dominated by men's voices and thoughts that give a great deal of attention to philosophical explanations of Christian faith. I believe their work demonstrates their love, knowledge, and enjoyment of God. I also believe Rosemary Radford Ruether is right when she observes, "God did not just speak once upon a time to a privileged group of males in one part of the world, making us ever after dependent on the codification of their experience."[10]

Let me add something else to my earlier statement about the task and goal of systematic theology. As Anabaptist women doing theology, we ought to see it as a creative process interested in recovering the sense of wholeness, unity, and integrity of our Christian witness. This involves identifying and articulating what is at the center of our faith, and this is an individual and corporate endeavor. How do we do this? James Cone talks about theology as loving God with our minds. Ellen Charry describes theology as knowing, loving, and enjoying God better.

When we turn ourselves to doing theology, we do so with all our being. Cone is drawing on the Shema that declares we are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength (Deuteronomy 6:4–6) and also to love our

neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:36–40). Likewise, Charry's sense of knowing, loving, and enjoying God better encompasses the range of human emotions as we sort though the pieces of our lives and bring them before God so that God might knit them together in new ways. Both these ways of thinking help me believe that even with all this history and tradition behind, beneath, and above me, there is still theological work I can do. We can never be done loving God, knowing God, or enjoying God even as we argue with God. To do this kind of work requires a willingness to ask questions and struggle with possible answers. What do we say "Yes" to? What we say "No" to? How ought we use the history and tradition that face us every time we open a book on theology, let alone the Bible?

A Theology of Wonder

It is important to determine if and how the biblical text speaks to the questions and concerns I am raising. I approach the Bible as someone who is trying to sort out what it seems to be saying to me and my community. When I went to the Bible in this case (or rather the Bible Windows computer program!), I looked in the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek New Testament, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV), and New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV) to determine how the word "wonder" is used.

Two words in Hebrew can be translated as "wonder": *mepheth* and *pala. Mepheth* has a variety of meanings including sign, miracle, and omen. It appears 36 times, 19 of which are in relation to the signs Moses and Aaron performed as they tried to get God's point across to Pharaoh to "Let my people go!" For example, in Exodus 7:9 (NRSV) God says to Moses, "'When Pharaoh says to you, "Perform a wonder," then you shall say to Aaron, "Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, and it will become a snake.'" In addition to the Exodus tradition, *mepheth* is part of OT prophetic literature. The meanings in this context are more complicated than in the Exodus event;[11] these signs and wonders were not always a good thing. *Pala* appears 13 times, most frequently in the Psalms, and conveys a sense of something being different and remarkable in a way rising above "the power of human knowledge *and* imagination."[12] The psalmist writes, "I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD; I will remember your wonders of old" (Psalm 77:11). This kind of

wonderment seems to point toward awe of, and reverence for, God's power. But it is not simply God's omnipotence that the people praise. Israel praises God for being delivered from slavery, for God preserving Israel as a people. The community celebrates God's wondrous acts that prove God is indeed ruler of the world.[13]

Turning to the Greek, I found the words *thaumastos*, which means "wonderful, [or] astonishing" and *teras* often paired with *semeion*, "sign." *Teras* means "miracle, wonder, miraculous sign, [or] portent." I also found that *thaumazo*, which means to "be amazed, [or] be astonished," is often translated as wonder or wonderful.[14] Words in this cluster appear about 67 times in the LXX and 66 in the NT. In both, *thaumastos* is used adjectively to describe God's marvelous deeds. Franz Annen explains that within the four Gospels *thaumazo* is used differently by each author. Mark uses *thaumazo* sparingly; Matthew uses it more, especially when he describes people's positive reactions to Jesus' miracles. In John, the people astonished are not Jesus' disciples and followers but those who are skeptical of his works. *Thaumazo* appears most frequently in Luke's gospel. "From the birth of Jesus (2:18, 33), to his resurrection (24:12, 41) his life and work evoke astonishment. There is astonishment at his preaching in Nazareth (4:22), at individual miracles (8:25; 11:14), and in response to his entire work (9:43). . . . However, it is not yet identical with authentic faith (cf. esp. 4:22; 9:43)."[15]

These words are also used in Job. "And if I lift myself up, thou dost hunt me like a lion, and again work wonders against me" (Job 10:16 RSV). How can the same words be used to describe the salvific power of God's signs, wonders, and miracles and be part of Job's experience with suffering? Job and his friends Eliphaz and Elihu debate the meaning of God's wondrous works. Eliphaz declares, "'As for me, I would seek God, and to God I would commit my cause. God does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number,'" including sending rain to water the fields, protecting those who mourn, providing relief for the poor (Job 5:8–16). But for Job, God's signs are only signs of God's power, not of God's goodness. Later, Elihu urges Job to "'consider the wondrous works of God. Do you know how God lays God's command upon them, and causes the lightning of the cloud to shine? Do you know the balancings of the clouds, the wondrous works of the one whose knowledge is perfect…?'" (Job 37:14b–16).

Because there is not a one-to-one translation of these five words into the same English word, I did a quick search in the RSV and NRSV translations and found that the related words appeared quite often.

	RSV	NRSV
wonder, -ful, -s, wondrous, -ly	156	98
amaze, -ing, -ment, -d	37	49
sign, -s	315	252
miracle, -s	13	11
marvel, -s, -lous, -lously	71	13
Total	592	423

What can we learn from the Bible's use of marvel, miracle, amazement, signs, and wonder? From the perspective of the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament, "God's mighty acts do not automatically engender confidence and hope on the part of human beings. The people must meet with a readiness to accept and rely on them as manifestations of God's enduring benevolence and power to act."[16] Dennis Quinn offers an additional observation that keeps in mind the scope of the entire Bible:

> It should be noted that the wonder-signs of God are real events that point to some future or otherwise hidden event or meaning. In other words, as the patristic and medieval commentators often noted, the actual events recorded in the Bible are capable of signifying something beyond the event. The miraculous character of the signs reveals the presence of God but not to those not inclined by faith to see God in the miracles – as was the case with Pharaoh in Exodus [whose heart was hardened at the sight of these things]. More important is the meaning of the wonder-signs – the mysteries they adumbrate.[17]

This is certainly the case in the New Testament, where we read of the miracles Jesus performed.

> After Jesus had left [the district of Tyre and Sidon], he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame,

> the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel (Matthew 15:29–31 NRSV).

Taking Stock of What Wonder Is

I began to seriously consider and wonder about "wonder" while enrolled in a course on the intersections between worship and the arts. Each student was asked to develop a question and then attend arts events and performances with that question in mind. My question was: What are the things in the arts and worship that create a sense of wonder and awe? As I worded my question, I was not working from a blank slate. In a previous seminar, a classmate encouraged us to approach film and fiction by allowing ourselves to feel wonder as our first reaction rather than immediately trying to make meaning out of the experience. Borrowing from Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation,"[18] he argued that if we don't avoid this pitfall we run the risk of shrouding art by not actually seeing the thing for what it truly is. I felt the challenge to engage art and nurture the creative life from a place that is "against interpretation." As I wrote my reflection papers, I saw a pattern emerging: feeling a sense of wonder involves our being drawn into the new and alternative world created by a work of art. At one level, wonder urges us to be in touch with what happened to us while we were in that other world. We may not always be transformed or changed in a dramatic way, but can we begin to describe what we felt, thought, or knew while we were in that other "universe"?

I have come to the conclusion that wonder is a multifaceted concept and thus seemingly complex. However, experientially we find there is a refreshing and life-giving simplicity at the heart of wonderment. For us to feel a sense of wonder – a new sense of awe, depth, mystery, and possibility – we must be drawn into the world created by our art and, in the case of Christian faith, a re-visioned world in which all things are made new: to have a theology of wonder.

How does this fit with the biblical witness of wonder? "Wonder excites, disturbs, agitates; it seizes the attention and stimulates the effort to find an answer."[19] The texts using the language of wonder show that God's activities

create this kind of excitement, disturbance, and agitation. People wanted to know what those signs and marvels meant. Imagine yourself as one of those lowly shepherds on that night the sky was filled with a marvelous light created by a band of God's messengers. What would you have done if you were doing the family's laundry on the day the Nile turned as red as blood? Can you fathom watching your neighbor's brother walk out of his grave the way Martha and Mary's did? The world of the Bible invites us to look for how God's purposes are being worked out. The challenge of wonder is whether we are ready to look out at our own world with the same sense of anticipation that God is going to make something happen.

If you turn in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* to Number 1, what words are printed on that page?

> What is this place where we are meeting? Only a house the earth its floor,
> walls and roof sheltering people, windows for light, an open door.
> Yet it becomes a body that lives when we are gathered here, and know our
> God is near.
>
> Words from afar, stars that are falling, sparks that are sown in us like seed.
> Names for our God, dreams, signs, and wonders sent from the past are what we need.
> We in this place remember and speak again what we have heard:
> God's free redeeming word.
>
> And we accept bread at this table, broken and shared, a living sign.
> Here in this world, dying and living, we are each other's bread and wine.
> This is a place where we can receive what we need to increase:
> God's justice and God's peace.[20]

This hymn invites us to move into our religious and theological imagination and be astonished that God can make us a body, grow faith in us, and give us hope that the world will know God's peace, justice, and freedom. Developing a theology of wonder involves approaching our faith and beliefs in a way that allows us to be stirred by the astonishing and wondrous claims we are making. The MCC poster created by Howard Zehr and Joel Kauffman reads, "Jesus was once asked for this support of the death penalty. His reply, 'Let one who is without sin cast the first stone.'" To some, this statement may sound like moral exhortation. To others, a positive political platform. When we approach it from the perspective of wonder, we are stopped in our tracks by these unexpected words. In that moment, we look down and see a large stone

clasped in our hand and we look up and see many other stones in many other hands some aimed at us, some aimed at our enemies, some aimed at our friends. We have a choice to make: Will we drop those stones?

The question I just asked leads me to a propositional statement: God intends for all that is in the world to be reconciled to Godself through the establishment of God's kin-dom, which is established through our love of God, self, and neighbor and God's gifts of peace, justice, and freedom. There are many ways I could document or attempt to "prove" this proposition, but I will simply point to Mary's Magnificat as a example of God's self-disclosure or revelation, in which we are invited to imagine a world of peace, freedom, and justice. I approach my claim and Mary's song by looking toward the horizon of a new day that his beginning to dawn as I scan the skies for signs of hope and wonder.

Artist, author, poet, and pastor Jan Richardson has helped me find my way to this place. She writes,

> So many things disguise themselves as hope. So much crosses our threshold, promising change or relief from present circumstances, that sometimes it becomes difficult to tell the difference between a reasonable hope and a misguided delusion. . . . Hope becomes easier to recognize when we learn that it rarely comes from outside us. More often it comes from within, emerging from the place where our deepest longings meet our willingness to make them real. In that place, hope sheds its disguises, moving with grace and freedom to point us beyond our delusions toward the landscape of possibility.[21]

The struggle of God's self-disclosure being birthed in this world – new life and new meaning when so much militates against it – is also the personal struggle of faith as we imagine the world as it ought to be and as we seek to find our place in what God is doing to establish the kin-dom.

The fact of women's participation in God's revelatory process affects our understanding of revelation. Consider Gabriel's message to Mary (Luke 1:26-38), Mary's Song (Luke 1:46-55), and her acceptance of motherhood as she chose to be obedient to God's revelatory design and intention using four markers of revelation.[22]

1. PROMISE: the disclosure of God's intention toward us.
   "'And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.'" (Luke 1:31)
2. COMMANDMENT: the disclosure of God's will which lays claim on us.
   "'He will be great, and will be called the Song of the Most High. . . .'" (Luke 1:32a)
3. COVENANT: the disclosure of God's commitment to us.
   "'He has helped his servant Israel . . . according to the promise he made to our ancestors.'" (Luke 1:54a, 55)
4. SALVATION: the disclosure of God's power at work among us.
   "'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . . for the Mighty One has done great things for me. . . .'" (Luke 1:47, 49a)

I have only scratched the surface with these brief citations, but the possibilities for more parallels are plentiful. By incorporating Mary's role as the original embodiment of the *in utero* incarnate God into the Christ event, we see that God's revelation is inclusive of, and relies on, women. Furthermore, embodiment has taken place in a woman's body as well as a man's, showing a unity of God's Word (masculine) and Wisdom (feminine). This also broadens the authoritative impact of the Bible and the times and places of God's revelatory messages being made known to us. I am not romanticizing pregnancy, nor am I saying being pregnant is the only way women have participated in God's self-disclosure! To be sure, Christianity has held that childbearing is the only way women can be made worthy of God's redemption. (And with the story of Hagar in Genesis, pregnancy has some bitter consequences.) When the infant Jesus is presented at the Temple, the prophetess Anna joins Simeon in praising God and the arrival of God's salvation. Together they declare "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32 NRSV).

The Wonder of God in Dancing Trinity

But who is this God who is being revealed? This is the One who is Three. As feminist theologian Anne Clifford points out, "God in Christianity is not a transcendent monad, but a living and loving community of three profoundly related to one another and to the world."[23] I have not always been Trinitarian,

for a number of reasons, but they all boiled down to my ignorance of how theologians have explained what the Trinity is. Initially, my anti-Trinity campaign was based on the way Christians uncritically accepted the maleness of God, which I still believe is a legitimate concern. Clifford notes, "Maleness projected onto the triune God of Christian revelation ignores the potential for a Trinitarian theology that relates to feminist values, such as solidarity in diversity, the value of equal and mutual partnerships, and the importance of communion to being a fully human person."[24] This kind of projection is still a serious theological problem in our churches, but we have theological tools to dismantle the male edifice of God.

Catherine Mowry LaCugna's work is one of those tools. In *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life*, she explains why "the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the specifically Christian way of speaking about God, summarizes what it means to participate in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit."[25] As she traces the history of Trinitarian doctrine, she describes how "a unitarian, patriarchal, monarchical, hierarchical theism gradually replaced a Trinitarian monotheism, with disastrous political results." Without the theological understanding of an egalitarian, balanced theism, "Christian theologians justified every kind of hierarchy, exclusion and pattern of domination, whether religious, sexual, political clerical, racial, as 'natural' and divinely intended."[26]

In this context, I want to highlight LaCugna's discussion of the Divine *Perichoresis.* In the eighth century, John of Damascus first used the Greek term *perichoresis* to describe the internal relationships of the First, Second, and Third persons of the Trinity. John offered this model to respond to debates raging in his context. He wanted to express his sense that "the three divine persons mutually inhere in one another, draw life from one another, 'are' what they are by relation to one another. … Each divine person is irresistibly drawn to the other, taking his/her existence from the other, containing the other in him/herself, while at the same time pouring self out into the other."[27] To make this concept more concrete, LaCugna notes, all kinds of impersonal analogies have been used, from lamps in houses to three-dimensional objects.

> This is why the image of "the divine dance" has been used to translate *perichoresis*. . . . Choreography suggests the partnership of movement, symmetrical but not redundant, as each dancer

> expresses and at the same time fulfills him/herself towards the other. In the inter-action and inter-course, the dancers (and observers) experience one fluid motion of encircling, encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching. There are neither leaders nor followers in the divine dance, only an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, giving again and receiving again.[28]

The God being revealed to us is one who dances – perhaps even under the canopy of a Red Tent.

Listen to Peter's Pentecost sermon from Acts 2:17-19 (NRSV/RSV). While the tone is quite apocalyptic, his words are full of creative possibility:

> "In the last days it will be," God declares, "that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your [youth] shall see visions, and your [elders] shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist."

Remember, there is power in the blood of the Red Tent as well.

The Wonder of Incarnation and Christ-Sophia

Revelation is a major topic in Christian theology because it deals with the centrality and uniqueness of Jesus as the ultimate self-disclosure of God. Jann Aldredge-Clanton reminds us that "Christian theology does not limit Christ to the lifetime of the historical Jesus. Christ, like God, is eternal, existing from the beginning and acting to begin creation. For many centuries after the life and death of Jesus, theologians debated and struggled with formulas and creeds to express the relationship between God and Christ." Rosemary Radford Ruether questions the anthropological assumptions we make when we identify the "Son" as the full and final self-disclosure of the "Father." She asks, "Can a Male Savior Save Women?"[29] After describing the historical background and "patriarchalization" of christology, Ruether offers some alternative christological approaches,[30] ending with a proposal for a feminist christology.

Ruether challenges the notion that Jesus understood himself as the end-all-and-be-all of God's self-disclosure. She argues that Jesus was not

proclaiming his message in a way that evoked the kingship of a Davidic Messiah. This Davidic tradition, she says, is Judean in origin and therefore would have been less familiar to a Galilean like Jesus. He proclaimed the coming Reign of God, and by following this path rather than preaching the violent overthrow of Rome and all unjust institutions associated with it, he spoke out against the religious hegemony of his day. He went so far as to announce that "God has not just spoken in the past but is speaking *now,"* and for our contemporary world this Jesus "frees religious experience from the fossilization of past traditions . . . and makes it accessible in the present." Most of all, this "Jesus does not think of himself as the 'last word of God,' but points beyond himself to 'One who will come.'"[31]

This portrait of Jesus Christ and how he understood himself as a preacher and teacher then and the living Christ now is radically different from the imperial christology that requires the kingship and *logos* motifs to justify its ideological base.

> Christ as *Logos* or *Nous* (mind) of God discloses the divine mind and provides the plan and government of the established social cosmos. All is integrated into one vast hierarchy of being. Just as the *Logos* of God governs the cosmos, so the Christian Roman Emperor, together with the Christian Church, governs the political universe; masters govern slaves and men govern women. Women, slaves, and barbarians . . . are the *a-logoi,* the "mindless" ones, who are to be governed and defined by the representatives of divine *Logos*.[32]

Those representatives are the leaders of the apostolic church, the very people whom the Christian tradition endows with authority because they give us a first-hand account of the life of the historical Jesus. Ruether grants the apostolic leaders authority, but it comes after "the mythology about Jesus as Messiah or divine *logos,* with its traditional masculine imagery, is stripped off."[33] I want to take Ruether's position one step further. With these myths in place, women's experiences become questions of theological anthropology rather than a significant theological problem for *logos*-based doctrines of revelation. I agree with Ruether that the Jesus of the gospels discloses God's vision of the Messiah as a servant, not a king. There is an end to domination and a liberation from hierarchy – this is wonderful, marvelous news!

This liberative, incarnational christology is helpful, but how can I express belief in Jesus' divinity if my acceptance of *logos* is highly qualified or even rejected? There is another biblical christology that my feminist theology of wonder incorporates into its system, that of Christ-Sophia. Citing the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Jann Aldredge-Clanton writes,

> Sophia christology pervades the early Christian missionary movement. The earliest theological interpretations of Jesus' life and death see Jesus as Sophia's messenger and later as Sophia herself. The earliest traditions connect Jesus with divine Sophia, the God of gracious goodness who accepts the poor, the outcast. Wisdom literature depicts Sophia as sister, wife, mother, beloved, and teacher. She is the leader on the way, the preacher in Israel, and the Creator God. She seeks all people and invites them to dinner. She offers life, rest, knowledge, and salvation to those who accept her. Sophia officiates in the sanctuary and sends both prophets and apostles. The early Christians attributed all these characteristics of Sophia to Jesus. The connection of Jesus with Sophia, who wills the wholeness of everyone, enabled the earliest Christian communities to become a discipleship of equals.[34]

What I appreciate about this christology is its emphasis on relationship and the integrity of womanhood in the community of faith. Do you sense the same kind of possibility that I do in such an understanding of a dancing God who has come to live in our midst as Christ-Sophia and teaches us how to dance? Consider the words from a well-known folk hymn:

> I danced in the morning
> when the world was begun,
> And I danced in the moon
> and the stars and the sun,
> And I came down from heaven
> and I danced on Earth,
> At Bethlehem I had my birth.
> Dance, then, wherever you may be,
> "We are the Three of the dance," said s/he,
> "And we'll lead you all wherever you may be,
> And we'll lead you all in the dance," said s/he.[35]

The Wonder of the Spirit's Work

I love to dance, so it should not surprise you that I have found this idea of a dancing God to be of great importance and joy. I even have a t-shirt that reads, "To hell with war, let's dance instead." But dancing is not an end in and of itself. One of the gifts of nineteenth-century philosophy's impact on religion and theology is that a clearer connection was forged between theology and ethics. As a Mennonite, what I do with my beliefs is a vital part of my theological reflection. This turn to ethics is pneumatological. Fruitful living patterned after Christ-Sophia the Apple Tree or Tree of Life is how I like to think about ethics. But the seed is not sown and cultivated on its own; this is the work of the Spirit.

> The tree of life my soul hath seen,
> Laden with fruit, and always green;
> The trees of nature fruitless be
> Compared with Christ-Sophia the Apple Tree.[36]

Christian theology and ethics relies on a sense of moral agency in order to be of any use to us or the communities we are part of. Moral agency is the power to embody active love for creation (includes self, other, and other-than-humans), the power to orient life around the long-term well-being of communities and the Earth, prioritizing the concerns of the most vulnerable.[37] In this way, we might think of moral agency as our invitation to wonder. How can our claiming and exercising of this power bring about a new sense of awe, depth, mystery, and possibility that leads to a revisioned world in which all things are made new?

Diane Ackerman wrote a poem that reads in part, "I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, as a healer of misery, as a messenger of wonder, as an architect of peace."[38] As a Guardian of Nature how will I cherish the natural order? As a Healer of Misery, how will I nurture people? As a Messenger of Wonder, how will I nonconform freely so that the signs of which I speak will not be corrupted? As an Architect of Peace, how will I learn from the world community so that the home we build has room for every being? These are the ethical questions that face us when our faith and belief is placed in a God who dances, who sows seeds, and performs wonders.

The Warning to Tend God's Wondrous Works

Let us remember that passivity in the face of these wonders is dangerous. In John's Revelation (12:1ff), his vision contains a scene where a gloriously robed woman is giving birth and a dragon waits to snatch up her baby and devour it. In the context of a theology of wonder, the dragon is a metaphor for all those things in our lives that have taken over or threaten to take over our moral agency. We need that agency not only to preserve our sanity, but because it is how we move our theologizing into action. To be able to imagine a world of peace, justice, and freedom, I must have access to those things in my own life and be able to model them in my faith community. This means I need to know how to ward off tree-killing axes, toxins in their various forms, violence-making wrecking balls, and voice-squelching crazymakers. In the case of that fire-breathing dragon, listen to words of the gloriously-robed woman herself:

> When it was all over
> they asked me for a charm
> for banishing dragons.
>
> I said
> look them in the eye
> and call them by name.
> It makes them mad as hell,
> but they can't abide
> the knowing
> of their name.[39]

So, friends, learn the names of those dragons that want to crush the things that are coming to life and finding their voice in you. The sparks that have been sown in you like seed are signs of God's wondrous work in you. God's wonders reveal God's power, and God's power in us is our agency. Do not neglect the fruit of the Spirit that feeds your soul and your creativity.

> This fruit doth make my soul to thrive.
> It keeps my dying faith alive,
> which makes my soul in haste to be
> with Christ-Sophia the Apple Tree. [40]

Imagining a world of peacefulness and freedom that is full of God's justice is our birthright in our new lives as Christian women who are called to be messengers of wonder. As we go forth, let us "sing a new song to the One who has said, 'Behold, I make all things new.'"

Notes

[1] Robert H. King, "Introduction: The Task of Theology" in Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, eds., *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, Newly updated ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 1-27.

[2] John Macquarrie, "Systematic Theology," in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

[3] King, "Introduction: The Task of Theology," 5-7.

[4] C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 84–94. Snyder also mentions the Anabaptists' penchant for reading the Bible's prophetic literature because "like virtually all Christians in the sixteenth century, [they] were convinced that they were living in the Last Days, and that Christ's return was imminent."

[5] *Ibid.*, 88.

[6] I have written two brief (unpublished) papers on the debate between J. Denny Weaver and C. Arnold Snyder in which I outline and make observations about their major points of disagreement. I am happy to share them with anyone interested in reading them.

[7] King, 13-14.

[8] *Ibid.*, 15.

[9] *Ibid.*, 17-18.

[10] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (with a New Introduction)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

[11] S. Wagner, "*môp̲eṯ*" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 8; eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry; trans. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 178.

[12] J. Conrad, *"pl', pele'"* in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 8, 534 (emphasis mine).

[13] *Ibid.*, 540-41.

[14] Franz Annen in *The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2; eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 134-36. Horst Balz in *The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3; eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 350.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Conrad, 542.

[17] Dennis Quinn, *Iris Exiled: A Synoptic History of Wonder* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2002), 121.

[18] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966).
[19] Quinn, 3.
[20] Huub Oosterhuis, "Zomaar wyn dak wat hoofden," trans. David Smith (Portland: OCP Publications, 1984) in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, managing ed. Rebecca Slough (Elgin, Newton, Scottdale: Brethren Press, Faith & Life Press, Herald Press; 1992), #1.
[21] Jan L. Richardson, *Night Visions: Searching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 64-65.
[22] C. Norman Kraus, *God our Savior: Theology in a Christological Mode* (Scottdale, Waterloo: Herald Press, 1991), 49.
[23] Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 115.
[24] *Ibid.*, 110-11.
[25] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), 1.
[26] *Ibid.*, 17.
[27] *Ibid.*, 270-71.
[28] *Ibid.*, 271-72.
[29] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983, 1993), 116-38.
[30] *Ibid*, 127-34. These include androgynous Christologies found among Gnostics (Clement of Alexandria), medieval mysticism (Julian of Norwich), and 19th-century Romanticism (Horace Bushnell); and spirit Christologies found in new prophetism, Montanism, martyr literature, the movement started by Joachim of Fiore, and the Shakers of New England.
[31] *Ibid.*, 119-21, emphasis Ruether's.
[32] *Ibid.*, 125.
[33] *Ibid.*, 135-36.
[34] Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *In Search of the Christ-Sophia: An Inclusive Theology for Liberating Christians* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), 21.
[35] My adaptation of Sydney Carter, "Lord of the Dance" (New York: Galliard Ltd., 1963) in *Sing and Rejoice: New Hymns for Congregations*, comp. and ed. Orlando Schmidt (Scottdale, Kitchener: Herald Press, 1979), #67.
[36] Anonymous, "The Tree of Life" from *Divine Hymns* in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, managing ed. Rebecca Slough (Elgin, Newton, Scottdale: Brethren Press, Faith & Life Press, Herald Press; 1992), #509.
[37] Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 35-36.
[38] Diane Ackerman, "Guardians," quoted by Syracuse Cultural Workers in "2002-2003 Tools for Social Change" (Syracuse: SCW, 2002), 29.
[39] Jan L. Richardson, "Sun Woman Speaks" in *In Wisdom's Path: Discovering the Sacred in Every Season* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 13.
[40] Anonymous