RESEARCH QUESTION:
To what extent has the Patristic tradition influenced Elizabeth Johnson's feminist theology, particularly in her articulation of the Trinity?

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INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the Trinity, positing one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is one of the most complex philosophical and theological subjects. As a result, theologians across the centuries have devoted immense energy to its articulation and defence. While the foundational formulations of Trinitarian doctrine were forged in the early centuries of Christianity, particularly by the Church Fathers of Patristic period, modern theologians continue to engage these ancient insights, often reinterpreting them through the lens of contemporary concerns. Among such voices, Elizabeth Johnson stands out as a preeminent feminist theologian whose work seeks to both critique and creatively retrieve elements of the Christian tradition, including Trinitarian theology.

Elizabeth Johnson's theology is situated within the wider movement of feminist theological reflection that emerged prominently in the 20th century. This movement critiques the historical marginalization of women within the Christian theology and ecclesial structures and calls for the revision of theological language, symbols, and doctrines that have perpetuated gender inequality.

Feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Reuther, Mary Daly, and Sallie McFague laid important groundwork in this area by exposing the patriarchal assumptions embedded in traditional theology and by offering alternative models of the divine. Johnson builds upon and extends these insights by seeking to remain deeply rooted in Christian tradition while also pressing it toward greater inclusivity and justice. Rather than discarding tradition altogether, she engages in hermeneutics of retrieval, a strategy that critically appropriates the theological legacy of the Church, including its earlier expressions in the Patristic period. What distinguishes Johnson's approach is her deep engagement with classical theology, including the work of the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine of Hippo, and others who shaped the early Trinitarian debates. She does not approach these figures merely as relics of a bygone era but as theological conversationalist whose insights can be reformulated considering contemporary feminist concerns.

At the same time, she is resolute in her critique of the patriarchal and androcentric dimensions of these traditions. In this way, her theology reflects a dual impulse, to critique the gendered limitations of the tradition while simultaneously reclaiming its theological and spiritual richness for a more inclusive understanding of God.

Research Aim and Scope

This dissertation explores the extent to which the Patristic tradition particularly the theological contributions of the early Church Fathers, has influenced Elizabeth Johnson's feminist theology of the Trinity. The research question guiding this study is:

To what extent has the Patristic tradition influenced Elizabeth Johnson's feminist theology, particularly in her articulation of the Trinity?

While the question is cantered on influence, the study acknowledges that Johnson's relationship to Patristic tradition is neither uncritical nor simplistic. Rather, it is marked by a varied interplay of critique, retrieval, and reinterpretation.

Accordingly, this study will investigate both the positive takeover of Patristic theological insights such as divine relationality, perichoresis, and apophaticism and Johnson's critical engagement with the patriarchal structures embedded in the tradition.

The scope of the dissertation includes Johnson's major theological works, particularly *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (1992)* and *Quest for the Living God (2007)* as well as key Patristic sources from authors such as Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea, and Augustine of Hippo.

In examining these sources, the study will focus on Johnson's treatment of Trinitarian language, divine relationality, the role of the Holy Spirit, and her apophatic theological framework.

This investigation holds significance both for feminist theology and for broader field of historical and systematic theology. First, it contributes to the ongoing task of assessing how historical theological sources can be engaged in a way that is faithful to their insights while also responsive to contemporary ethical and epistemological concerns. Second, it provides a focused case study of how one leading feminist theologian reappropriates the Christian tradition not simply rejecting it as irredeemably patriarchal but rather discerning within its possibilities for liberation and transformation. Finally, the study speaks to wider ecclesial

and theological debates about language for God, the development of doctrine, and the role of historical sources in shaping contemporary theology.

Johnson's work exemplifies a particular methodological commitment namely, that theological language must evolve in response to new insights and social realities while remaining in continuity with the tradition. Her engagement with the Patristic tradition thus serves as a model for what David Tracy calls, 'critical correlation'' between the past and the present, between the sources of faith and the contemporary situation.'[1]

This study adopts a hermeneutical and comparative approach, drawing on both systematic theology and historical theology. The research proceeds in four methodological steps namely, Textual Analysis of Johnson's primary theological writings, especially her treatment of the Trinity and divine relationality.

Second, Historical Engagement with key Patristic texts and doctrines, including Nicene and post-Nicene theological developments.

Third, Ideological Comparison of central theological motifs such as perichoresis, apophaticism, divine simplicity, and Trinitarian relationality across Johnson and her Patristic

[1] David, Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*. (Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 100–103.

Methodology

interlocutors and lastly, Critical Evaluation of the nature and extent of Patristic influence on Johnson's theology, including areas of alignment, divergence, and creative transformation. Special attention will be given to Johnson's theological method particularly her use of analogy, symbol and metaphor in retrieving elements of Patristic thought. Her feminist reactivation of doctrine will be interpreted considering her broader methodological principles including the option for the oppressed and the epistemological centrality of women's experience.[2]

Several key theological and methodological concepts guide this investigation.
Johnson and Radford define Feminist Theology as a theological method that foregrounds women's experience as a source for theological reflection and seeks to challenge patriarchal structures within Christian thought.[3]

Patristic Tradition is defined as the body of theological doctrinal, and spiritual writings produced by the early Church Fathers, especially during the first five centuries of Christianity.[4]

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[2] Johnson, Elizabeth A. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. Crossroad, 1992, pp. 27–33.

[3] Ibid., pp. 11-14; Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Beacon Press, 1983, pp. 11–14.

[4] Pelikan, Jaroslav. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Volume 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*. University of Chicago Press, 1971, pp. 1–3.

Perichoresis is a Greek term referring to the mutual indwelling or interpretation of the three divine persons in the Trinity, first developed by the Cappadocians.[5]

Apophatic theology is also known as negative theology; this tradition emphasizes the ineffability of God and the limits of human language to describe the divine essence. [6]

Trinitarian Relationality – a theological concept emphasizing that the divine persons are defined not by substance or role but by their relations to one another.[7]

These concepts serve as touchstones for assessing Johnson's engagement with the Patristic tradition and for evaluating the extent to which her feminist theology is influenced by and contributes to, the development of Trinitarian doctrine.

Several scholars have examined Johnson's theological project in the context of feminist theology. Anne E. Carr noted that Johnson's work ''represents a critical yet constructive engagement with the Christian tradition, ''pointing to her skill in navigating between fidelity to tradition and feminist critique. [8]Similarly, Susan A. Ross has highlighted Johnson's use of apophatic theology as a means of resisting gender essentialism in speech about God. [9]

[5] Prestige, G. L. *God in Patristic Thought*. Wipf & Stock, 2004, pp. 291–294.

[6] Turner, Denys. *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 19–24.

[7] Boff, Leonardo. *Trinity and Society*. Orbis Books, 1988, pp. 8–11.

[8] Carr, E. Anne, "The God Who Is Involved." *Theological Studies*, vol. 54, no. 3, 1993, pp. 545–52.

[9] Ross, A. Susan, *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacramentality, and Justice*. Paulist Press, 2006, pp. 89–91.

While there is significant scholarly work on Johnson's theology, less attention has been paid to the specific influence of the Patristic tradition on her Trinitarian formulations. Existing studies often address her feminist methodology or her symbolic use of Sophia, but do not offer sustained analysis of her dialogue with early Christian theologians.
This dissertation seeks to fill this gap by offering a focused exploration of the Patristic influence on Johnson's articulation of the Trinity.

This dissertation is organised into five chapters as follows: the first chapter, The patristic doctrine of the Trinity. This chapter surveys the key developments in Trinitarian theology during the Patristic era, focusing on the Cappadocians and Augustine. It highlights central concepts such as perichoresis, divine unity, and relationality.

The second chapter, The Emergence and Methodology of Feminist Theology – outlines the development of feminist theology and situates Johnson's work within this broader context. It discusses the principles of feminist critique and the hermeneutics of retrieval that guide her theological method.

The third chapter, Reclaiming Tradition: Johnson's use of Patristic Sources in a Feminist Key, analyses Johnson's explicit references to and engagements with Patristic sources, focusing on how she represents these traditions to support feminist theological aims.

Chapter four critiques and Expands on the Trinitarian Doctrine. It evaluates Johnson's feminist reinterpretation of the Trinity, paying special attention to her use of symbolic

language, her challenge to androcentric language, and her alternative models for divine relationality.

In chapter five, Evaluating Influence: Continuity and Transformation. This concluding chapter assesses the extent of Patristic influence on Johnson's theology. It examines areas of convergence and divergence and offers a critical evaluation of how tradition and innovation interact in her work.

Elizabeth Johnson's theology represents a rare synthesis; she is at once a rigorous scholar of Christian tradition and a passionate advocate for feminist theological transformation. Her work on Trinity exemplifies this dual commitment. By engaging the Patristic tradition with both reverence and critique, Johnson models a theological methodology that is deeply historical yet radically contemporary.

The aim of this dissertation is to uncover the dept and complexity of this engagement and to evaluate the role the Patristic tradition plays in shaping her feminist vision of the Triune God. In so doing, it contributes to ongoing conversations about the future of Trinitarian theology and the role of tradition in feminist thought.

CHAPTER ONE:

Elizabeth Johnson's Theology and the Patristic Doctrine of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity, the theological assertion that God is one essence in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit emerged through centuries of theological reflection, particularly during the Patristic era. Johnson, one of the foremost Catholic feminist theologians of the contemporary period, engages with this legacy critically and constructively. While she reinterprets classical Trinitarian doctrine to align with feminist sensibilities, she draws upon the insights of key Patristic theologians, especially the Cappadocians and Augustine, who were instrumental in shaping orthodox Trinitarian theology.

This chapter surveys the pivotal developments in Trinitarian thought during the Patristic era, tracing the contributions of these theologians and highlighting how their formulations inform and, at times, contrast with Johnson's feminist reimagining of the Trinity. It also considers the complementary and critical contributions of other feminist theologians such as Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Mary Daly, and Rosemary Radford Reuther.

While Johnson's work is a cornerstone of feminist Trinitarian theology, other feminist theologians have contributed significantly to rethinking the doctrine considering contemporary concerns about gender, power, and relationality.

These theologians often share a commitment to recovering or reinterpreting Christian tradition in ways that affirm women's full humanity and critique patriarchal structures embedded in classical theology.

The Trinitarian controversy in early Christianity arose as the Church grappled with how to articulate the relationship between Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the God of Israel. The New Testament presents a variety of experiences and testimonies of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, but does not offer a systematic theology of the Trinity.

In the second and third centuries, theologians such as Tertullian and Origen began articulating theological language that would later become foundational to Trinitarian orthodoxy. Tertullian coined the Latin term *trinita,* referring to ''one substance, three persons'' (*una substantia, tres personae*), while Origen emphasized the eternal generation of the Son from the Father and offered complex, often speculative reflections on divine hierarchy and economy.[10]

Johnson acknowledges that these early formulations were instrumental but also influenced by philosophical categories and cultural assumptions, some of which enshrined patriarchal structures.[11] She emphasizes that the theological language developed in these periods was neither neutral nor immutable but was shaped by and from its time.

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[10] Origen. *On First Principles*. Translated by G. W. Butterworth, Harper & Row, 1966

[11] Johnson, Elizabeth A. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. Crossroad, 1992

The fourth century marked a decisive moment for Trinitarian theology. The council of Nicaea (325 CE) affirmed the consubstantiality (*homoousios*) of the Son with the Father, a crucial claim against Arianism. However, the language of *homoousios* remained ambiguous and controversial until the Cappadocian Fathers – Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa refined and expanded the terminology to achieve conceptual clarity and theological coherence.

Basil distinguished between *Ousia* (essence) and *hypostasis* (person) asserting that God is one in *Ousia* and three in *hypostaseis*. He likened this to three human beings sharing one common nature, though each is a distinct person. This distinction allowed Basil to maintain both the unity and the distinction within the Trinity without lapsing into modalism or tritheism. For Basil, relationality is essential to the divine life. The persons of the Trinity are not isolated but exist only in relation to one another.[12]

Johnson finds in this Cappadocian emphasis on relationality a theological resource for reimagining God in non-hierarchical, mutual and inclusive terms. In *She Who Is*, she praises the Cappadocians for introducing a ''a language of communion'' that resonates with her feminist emphasis on mutuality and interdependence.[13]

[12] Basil of Caesarea. *On the Holy Spirit*. Translated by Stephen Hildebrand, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011

[13] Johnson, *She Who Is*, pp. 211–215.

In advancing Basil's framework, Gregory of Nazianzus emphasized the unity of divine action by arguing that all divine operations, creation, redemption, sanctification are carried out by the Trinity as one, though appropriated distinctly by each person. This ''inseparable operation'' guards against tritheism and underlines the mystery of unity in diversity. Gregory was also deeply concerned with safeguarding the full divinity of the Spirit, contributing to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), which affirms the Spirit as the ''the Lord, and the giver of life''.[14]

Johnson draws upon this understanding of unity in diversity to critique modern theological and ecclesial hierarchies. She asserts that the Trinity, as a communion of equals, stands as a model for social and ecclesial relations grounded in mutuality, not domination.[15] For Ruether, the Trinity should not reinforce ecclesial or societal hierarchies but rather model egalitarian community. Her commitment to ecofeminism also influences her theology, linking divine relationality to the interconnectedness of all creation.[16]

Gregory of Nyssa introduced the idea of *epektasis*, the soul's continual movement into God, who is infinite and beyond full comprehension. For Gregory, the Trinity is not merely a static structure but a dynamic mystery into which the believer is continually drawn.[17]

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[14] Gregory of Nazianzus. *Theological Orations*. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd Series, vol. 7, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Eerdmans, 1980.

[15] Johnson, *She Who Is*, pp. 222–225.

[16] Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Beacon Press, 1983

[17] Gregory of Nyssa. *The Life of Moses*. Translated by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, Paulist Press, 1978.

Johnson aligns with this apophatic trajectory in her theology, insisting that God transcends all human language and categories, including gender. She advocates for a theological method that 'names God metaphorically,'' always aware of the inadequacy of all human concepts.[18]

While the Cappadocians developed Trinitarian theology within a Greek philosophical framework that emphasized relationality and dynamic communion. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) approached the doctrine from a Latin and more introspective perspective. In *De Trinitate*, Augustine develops a psychological analogy for understanding the Trinity; the human mind as memory (*memoria*), understanding *(intelligentia*), and will (*voluntas*), which reflect the Triune God.[19]

Augustine's emphasis on the unity of the divine essence was aimed at safeguarding monotheism, but some critics argue that his model risks subordinating the persons by abstracting their relational distinctiveness. While Augustine insists that on the co-equality of the persons, his analogies often prioritize the divine essence over personal relationality. Johnson critiques aspects of Augustine's Trinitarian theology for insufficiently emphazing mutuality and relational differentiation. She argues that Augustine's model reflects the individualism of his context and does not fully express the social dimensions of the divine life.[20]

[18] Johnson, *She Who Is*, pp. 107–109.

[19] Augustine. *The Trinity*. Translated by Edmund Hill, New City Press, 1991.

[20] Johnson, *She Who Is*, pp. 225–228.

However, she also finds in Augustine's apophatic insights, his recognition of the inadequacy of language to fully grasp God, resources for her feminist theological method.[21] One of Augustine's enduring contributions is the idea that the Holy Spirit is the *communio* or bond of love between the Father and the Son. This formulation highlights that love is central to the divine life. Johnson reclaims this notion, arguing that if love is the essence of divine life, then the Trinity must be understood as a dynamic community of mutual self-giving, not a rigid hierarchy.[22]

Johnson does not reject the Patristic tradition but reads it critically and creatively. She recognizes its foundational role in Christian theology while exposing its limitations, especially regarding gender, hierarchy, and metaphorical language. In *She Who Is*, she writes, ''By retrieving classical Trinitarian in a feminist key, the Christian community can begin to speak of God in more liberating, inclusive ways.''[23]

Similarly, Radford Ruether in her seminal work, Sexism and God-talk, argues that theology must be both ''faithful to the core of Christian tradition'' and ''liberative for women.''[24]

Johnson's retrieval includes Trinitarian Relationality – from the Cappadocians, she affirms the Trinity as a community of relations, not a monarchical hierarchy. Apophatic Humility –

[21] Ibid., p. 110.

[22] Ibid., p. 229.

[23] Ibid., p. 230.

[24] Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Pp. 18.

from Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, she takes the idea that God transcends all human constructs and must be approached with humility. With metaphorical language she insists, echoing the Patristic awareness of divine transcendence, that all God-talk is metaphorical and partial. In Liberating praxis, Johnson's theology links doctrine to praxis, suggesting that belief in a mutual, relational Trinity should inspire ecclesial and societal structures marked by justice, inclusion and equality.

The Patristic development of the doctrine of the Trinity laid the foundation for Christian theology. Through the efforts of the Cappadocian and Augustine, the Church came to articulate a doctrine that affirmed the unity and distinction of the divine persons. Elizabeth Johnson engages this tradition with both reverence and critique. She recognizes the profound theological insights of the early Church while exposing the cultural and gendered limitations of its metaphors and structures. Her feminist theology of the Trinity seeks not to discard the tradition but to reclaim and reinterpret it in ways that affirm mutuality, inclusivity, and the radical mystery of the divine.

In my view on the feminist approach to tradition is that it represents one of the most vital and theological responsible efforts within the contemporary Christianity to recover the heart of the Gospel while addressing the historical exclusion of women. Rather than viewing tradition as a static deposit of doctrines immune to critique, I believe it should be understood as a living, dynamic process of transmission open to re-interpretation considering new historical contexts and experiences especially those of the marginalized groups.

I align with theologians like Rosemary Radford Reuther and Elizabeth Johnson, who advocate for a reformist feminist approach, one that neither uncritically accepts nor entirely discards tradition. I believe Christian tradition carries within its contradictory threads on one hand, it has been used to justify patriarchal hierarchies and silence women's voices; on the other hand, it contains profound resources for liberation, relationality, and inclusive images of the divine. A feminist theological approach must discern and retrieve those liberating elements while rejecting those that perpetuate injustice.

Tradition has often projected a narrowly male and hierarchical image of God; I support the feminist theological project of expanding the language of God beyond patriarchal metaphors. While classical terms like ''Father'' need not be discarded, they must be complemented by female and non-gendered metaphors that reflect the mystery and relationality of the Triune God. In this regard, Johnson's use of Trinitarian relationality as a model for inclusive, mutual relationships is particularly compelling. It shows how doctrine, when reimagined through feminist lenses, can challenge domination and promote justice rather than reinforce gendered hierarchies.

Ultimately, I view tradition as an ongoing conversation between the past and present. The feminist approach is not merely a critique of what has been, but a hopeful reimaging of what could be. As feminist theologians reinterpret doctrines like the Trinity, they open space for new ways of being church and understanding God. Rather than abandoning

tradition, the feminist approach enables us to transform it into a source of justice, relationality, and inclusivity – qualities I believe are central to the Gospel.

CHAPTER 2:

The Emergence and Methodology of Feminist Theology

The emergence of feminist theology in the twentieth century represents one of the most transformative and challenging developments in modern theological discourse. It interrogates deeply embedded patriarchal structures within Christian thought and aims to recover voices and experiences historically excluded from doctrinal formation and ecclesial life. Rooted in the broader socio-political transformations of the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminist theology reoriented theological methods by centring women's experience as a primary focus of reflection and by critically examining the androcentrism inherent in much of Christian tradition.

Among its most influential contemporary voices, Elizabeth A. Johnson stands out for her nuanced integration of feminist insight with its constructive retrieval of the Christian theologians, demonstrates how feminist theology is a diverse, multifaceted field that employs a variety of methodologies and addresses global and contextual concerns.

The intellectual and social roots of feminist theology are inseparable from the second-wave feminist movement, which emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s within a broader struggle for civil rights, anti-colonial liberation, and gender equality. [25] Feminist theology initially arose as a direct response to the recognition that Christian doctrine, liturgy, and ecclesial practice were deeply shaped by patriarchal structures that marginalized or silenced

[25] Frieden, A. Betty, *The Feminine Mystique*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1963.

women's voices.[26] This recognition was both theoretical and existential, grounded in women's lived experiences within churches that often-proclaimed theological anthropology affirming humanity but denied women full participation in practice. [27]

Feminist theology does not prescribe a single method, rather, it is united by a set of methodological commitments that sharp its engagement with theological sources and questions. Central among these commitments is the conviction that women's experience particularly in contexts of oppression, is a valid and indispensable source for theological reflection. [28]This approach calls for a re-examination of the traditional theological sources-Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, placing them in dialogue with feminist consciousness and the lived realities of diverse women. [29]

A defining feature of feminist theological method is the hermeneutics of suspicion, adapted from Paul Ricoeur and employed by feminist theologians to critically challenge the androcentric bias embedded within biblical texts and classical theological formulations. [30] These hermeneutic demands that inherited texts and traditions be scrutinized for the ways they reinforce gendered hierarchies and silences. Complementing this is the hermeneutics of remembrance, which seeks to recover and revalue the often-neglected contributions of

[26] Daly, Mary. *The Church and the Second Sex*, Beacon Press, 1968.

[27] Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Beacon Press, 1983.

[28] Fiorenza, E. Schüssler, *In Memory of Her*, Crossroad, 1983; Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, Yale University Press, 1970.

[29] Johnson, *She Who Is*,

[30] Ricoeur Paul, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, Yale University Press, 1970.

women throughout Christian history, both in official and grassroots contexts. [31] Together, these hermeneutical tools enable feminist theologians to engage critically and constructively with tradition, neither wholly rejecting it nor accepting it uncritically. Instead, the work to reclaim and reinterpret tradition in ways that affirm the dignity and agency of women and that promote justice within and beyond the church.

Elizabeth Johnson's theological method exemplifies this balance between critique and retrieval. In *She Who Is*, Johnson employs both hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance to challenge the distortions of the patriarchal God-language while drawing on the rich theological resources of the Christian tradition, including the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine, to articulate a vision of God that affirms both transcendence and relationality. [32]She rejects a wholesale abandonment of tradition, instead advocating for theological reformation faithful to the liberative core of the gospel message. [33]

In addition to hermeneutical tools, feminist theology often employs a contextual and interdisciplinary method, integrating insights from sociology, psychology, postcolonial studies, and ecology to enrich theological reflection and make it responsive to contemporary realities[34]. This openness to interdisciplinary dialogue marks feminist theology as dynamic and evolving, grounded in the concrete struggles of women and communities worldwide.

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[31] Fiorenza, E. Schüssler, *In Memory of Her*

[32] Johnson, *She Who Is*

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ruether Rosemary Radford, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Beacon Press, 1983

While Elizabeth Johnson's contributions are central to this study, the broader field of feminist theology has been shaped by a multitude of voices, each bringing unique perspectives shaped by cultural historical and ecclesial contexts.

Among the earliest feminist theologians was Mary Daly's in her work on *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968), articulate a sustained critique of Christian theology's patriarchal bias, drawing inspiration from Simone de Beauvoir's existential analysis of women's oppression. [35]Daly's later work, such as *Beyond God the Father (1973*), moved toward a radical rejection of the patriarchal God of tradition Christianity, advocating for a post-Christian spiritual vision free from androcentric domination.[36] Daly's sharp critique and sceptic approach sparked wide-ranging debate and forced theologians to confront whether Christian tradition could be redeemed or was irredeemably oppressive.

Another early feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether in her writing on *Sexism and God-Talk (1983),* advanced a reformist theological method grounded in the principle that ''whatever denies diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women cannot be redemptive.'' [37] It also articulated a feminist theological method that insisted theology must consistently affirm the liberation of women and dismantling of oppressive social structures. [38]

[35] Daly Mary, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Beacon Press, 1973.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ruether R. Radford, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*

[38] Ibid.

She also offers an alternative, grounding her work in both liberation theology and ecological concerns. *In Gaia and God* (1992). She explores the intersection of feminist and ecological theology, proposing an integrative vision in which the well-being of the planet and the liberation of women are inseparable.[39] Ruether's methodological hallmark is in her insistence that any theological system must be consistent with the full humanity of women. She sought to remain within the Christian tradition while insisting that its liberative potential could be reclaimed through rigorous critical hermeneutics. [40].

In pioneering feminist biblical hermeneutics, Schuuler Fiorenza's in her work, ''*In Memory of Her''* (1983) combined biblical scholarship and feminist hermeneutics to recover women's suppressed roles in early Christianity by reconstructing the role of women, and proposing a vision of a ''discipleship of equals'' grounded in Jesus' praxis and the earliest Christian communities.[41]

The emergence of feminist theology also interested with other liberation movements of the time, including Black theology, Latin American liberation theology, and postcolonial critiques, which collectively challenged dominant leadership and sought justice for marginalized groups. [42]

[39] Ruether, R. Radford, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*

[40] Ibid.

[41] Fiorenza, E. Schüssler, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*.

[42] Cone, H. James, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Seabury Press, 1969

Feminist theology engaged these dialogues critically, integrating insights while also problematizing racial, cultural, and class dynamics within predominantly white feminist discourse.[43] For example the works of womanist theologians like Delores Williams highlighted how Black women's experiences of racism and sexism demanded theological reflections attentive to integrating oppressions. [44]

Similarly, global and postcolonial feminist theologians such as Kwok Pui-Ian from Asia, African, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and, Latin American feminist theologian, Ivone Gebara brought cultural, ecological and communal dimensions to feminist theology, emphasizing the importance of context and decolonial perspectives.[45]

Resonating with Johnson's project in offering a feminist theological reformation is Catherine Mowry LaCugna's *God for Us* (1991)[46] LaCugna emphasizes the relational nature of the Trinity, interpreting it as a model for human community and Christian life. Her integration of the feminist concerns with classical doctrinal theology demonstrate that doctrine is not mere abstraction but a vision of divine life that calls for justice and relationality within the church and society.[47]

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[43] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Orbis Books, 1993.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Kwok, Pui-Ian. Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology. (Westminster John Knox, 2005); Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. Introducing African Women's Theology. (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).; Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, (Orbis Books, 1999).

[46] LaCugna, Catherine Mowry, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, HarperCollins, 1991.

[47] ibid

The work of contemporary feminist theologians -post 2000 like Marcella Althaus-Reid is often credited with pioneering Latin American queer, feminist, and liberative theologies bringing together issues of gender, sexuality, class and colonialism.

Her recent work, The *Indecent Theologies of Marcella Althaus- Reid: Voices from Asia and Latin America*, 2021 shows how her thought continues to influence theologians globally, especially in contexts of sexual diversity, postcoloniality, and intersections of poverty, gender, sexuality.

A leading figure in African postcolonial feminist biblical interpretation, Musa W. Dube, in her work critiques how colonial and patriarchal reading of the Bible have been used to marginalized African women. She proposes alternative metaphors and readings that affirm dignity, life, and justice.

A persistent tension within feminist theology is the dialectic between critique and continuity. The question remains: to what extent can Christian tradition be reinterpreted and reformulated to serve liberative ends without reproducing oppressive structures?

Johnson's work is illustrative here, as she engages the patristic tradition not as an uncritical inheritor but as a discerning interlocutor. [48]She conceives tradition as a living reality requiring continual reinterpretation considering the gospel and modern experience.[49]

[48] Johnson, A. Elizabeth, *She Who Is*,

[49] Ibid.

Feminist retrieval of tradition involves both the recovery of neglected women's contributions and the critical re-reading of male-authored theological texts for liberative possibilities. Johnson calls this process 'critical-construction theology', wherein histological theology is neither rejected outright nor accepted uncritically but dynamically engaged and reformulated.[50] This approach highlights that Christian tradition, while marred by patriarchal sin, also holds resources for imagining a more inclusive and just ecclesial life. [51]

This constructive retrieval situates feminist theology not outside but within the ongoing life of the church, proposing theological reform that honours the gospel's liberative message and fosters gender justice without abandoning faith in God's revealed truth.[52]
The emergence of feminist theology marks a profound shift in theological consciousness, insisting that the full humanity of women is an indispensable criterion for theological truth. From its origins in second-wave feminism through its methodological discourse.

Feminist theologians such as Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Forenza, Kwok Pui-Ian, Delores Williams, Ivone Gebara, Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Elizabeth Johnson have contributed distinct yet complementary insights, shaping a movement that is both critical and constructive.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

Johnson's synthesis of feminist methodology with a retrieval of patristic tradition exemplifies the creative potential of feminist theology, modelling a way to engage deeply with Christian tradition while remaining accountable to liberative demands. As this dissertation will further explore, such engagement offers not only critique but a renewed theological vision of God and Christian life which is faithful to tradition and responsive to modern or contemporary calls for justice.

CHAPTER 3:

Reclaiming Tradition: Johnson's Use of Patristic Sources in a Feminist Key.

One of the defining features of Elizabeth Johnson's theological work is her refusal to abandon the Christian tradition, despite its historical complicity in sustaining patriarchal hierarchies. Rather than discarding it as irredeemably compromised, she advocates for what she terms a ''critical-constructive theology that acknowledges both the oppressive dimensions of tradition and its latent liberative potential.[53] In this respect, diverges from earlier feminist theologian Mary Daly, who famously called for to move ''beyond God the Father'', leaving the structures of classical theology behind as hopelessly patriarchal. [54]Johnson by contrast, views tradition as a living stream, one capable of bearing new theological insights when reinterpreted considering the gospel and contemporary experience. At the heart of Johnson's endeavour lies her engagement with the patristic era, particularly the formative developments of Trinitarian doctrine in the fourth and fifth centuries.

This chapter will examine Johnson's engagement with the Patristic tradition in detail. Beginning with her methodological approach, it will then explore her reception of the Cappadocians, Augustine and key patristic themes such as divine relationality, transcendence, and pneumatology. Throughout, attention will be given to Johnson's distinctive feminist ''key'' – the way she transforms inherited categories to support a vision

[53] Ibid.,19

[54] Daly Mary, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, p. 33.

of God and Church that is liberating for women and for all creation. The chapter will conclude with an evaluative discussion of both the strengths and potential limitations of Johnson's Patristic retrieval.

This approach is both daring and necessary, in my opinion. It is daring because Johnson risks being accused by critics on either side of inconsistency, by traditionalists for destabilising received formulations, and by more radical feminist for compromising with patriarchal sources. Yet it is necessary, because theology that loses contact with its historical roots forfeits its ability to claim continuity with the faith of the church. By drawing the Patristics into dialogue, Johnson secures her feminist theology firmly within Christian orthodoxy while also stretching its boundaries. This integrative approach, to my mind, offers a convincing for constructive theology today.

Elizabeth Johnson's approach to Christian tradition is shaped by what she calls, ''a hermeneutics of retrieval and critique''.[55] This dual strategy seeks to hold together fidelity to the sources of Christian faith and a critical awareness of how these sources have been shaped by androcentric assumptions. As she explains in, *She Who Is*, the theological task for feminists involves ''remembering and reinterpreting'' the tradition in such a way that its liberative potential is disclosed without perpetuating structures of exclusion. [56]This dynamic interplay between reception and resistance defines her engagement with the Patristic Fathers and undergirds her constructive theological project.

[55]Johnson, Elizabeth A, *She Who Is*,

[56] Ibid., 29.

The method of retrieval reflects Johnson's conviction that the Christian tradition, despite its patriarchal distortions, contains genuine resources for the flourishing of women and men alike. In particular, she insists that the mystery of God always exceeds the limits of human language.[57] This recognition already emphasized by the Fathers, opens for space for challenging the exclusively masculine symbols that have dominated Christian discourse. Retrieval thus allows Johnson to uncover the dimensions of the Patristic heritage that speak powerfully to divine mystery, relationality, and love.

At the same time, the method of critique ensures that Johnson does not romanticize the past Patristic theology, for all its dept, emerged in societies where women's voices were largely marginalized. Augustine, for example, could articulate profound insights into divine love while simultaneously perpetuating views of women's subordination that remain problematic.[58] Johnson's hermeneutic allows her to affirm the former while rejecting the latter. She insists that fidelity to the gospel requires confronting the sinful legacies of patriarchy wherever they appear, even within the revered voices of the Church Fathers'.[59]

This balancing act between retrieval and critique also reflects Johnson's broader theological vision. She resists the temptation to construct a feminist theology *ex nihilo*, detached from historical foundations, because such an approach risk severing women from the living tradition of the Church. But she also resists the opposite temptation, accepting the tradition

[57] Ibid., 43-44

[58] Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, S.J. (New York: Newman Press, 1982) 9.5.9.

[59] Johnson, *She Who Is* 35.

uncritically in the name of continuity because this would allow oppressive structures to persist unchallenged. Instead, her hermeneutic embodies what one might call a ''critical fidelity''; a commitment to remain within the tradition, but always with a discerning eye toward its liberating possibilities and its patriarchal limitations.

In my own opinion, this method is one of Johnson's most significant contributions to contemporary theology. It demonstrates that feminist theology need not be adversarial to tradition but can engage it constructively. Moreover, it models a way of theological reflection that is deeply faithful to the Church's heritage while open to transformation in the light of contemporary insights. This dialectical approach offers a paradigm not only for feminist theologians but also for anyone who seeks to engage the Christian tradition in a way that is both critical and life-giving. In this case, Johnson's hermeneutics provide the key for understanding her constructive use of Patristic Fathers, a use that is at once appreciative. Critical and transformative.

Among the Patristic voices that Johnson reclaims, the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus, hold particular significance. Their fourth century articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity helped to shape the Church's confession of one God in three persons (hypostasis), a formulation that safeguarded both divine unity and the distinctness of Father, Son, and Spirit. [60]While their context was deeply

[60] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) 213–17

patriarchal, Johnson discerns their theology resources that can fruitfully engaged in a feminist key, especially their emphasis on relationality as constitutive of divine being. [61]

The Cappadocians were instrumental in articulating a non-subordinationist understanding of the Trinity. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, argued that the divine essence (ousia) is fully shared among the three persons, such that the distinction between them arise only in their relations of origin. For Johnson, this vision is critical because it avoids hierarchical models of divinity that could reinforce patriarchal structures. Instead, the Cappadocian insistence on equality within difference resonates with feminist critiques of domination and hierarchy.[62]

By highlighting divine relationality as fundamental, Johnson retrieves a vision of God that affirms mutuality and communion rather than solitary power. Johnson is particularly drawn to the Cappadocian notion that the three divine persons exist in a dynamic of *perichoresis* – mutual dwelling, that emphasizes relationality as intrinsic to divine being. [63]She interprets this as a corrective to monarchical or overly individualistic models of God that have historically underwritten patriarchal authority. In Johnson's reading, the Cappadocians invite Christians to imagine God not as a solitary patriarch enthroned in isolation, but as a communion of equals whose very life is characterized by reciprocity, self-giving, and love.[64]

[61] Johnson, *She Who Is. 223*

[62] Ibid., 224.

[63] Zizioulas John, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985) 40–44.

[64] Johnson, *She Who Is* 225.

Nevertheless, Johnson does not overlook the limitations of the Cappadocians' context. Their language, while often profound, remained gendered and androcentric. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, described the Trinity in terms of paternal imagery and drew analogies from patriarchal household structures.[65] Johnson hermeneutic of critique acknowledges these elements but refuses to let them define the whole of Cappadocian thought. Instead, she reclaims their insights into divine communion while rearticulating them in language that avoids gendered exclusivity.

From my perspective, this retrieval is one of Johnson's most effective moves. The Cappadocians' emphasis on equality and relationality provides fertile ground for feminist theology, especially in resisting hierarchical models of God that have too often been mirrored in ecclesial and social structures. By reframing their insights in inclusive terms, Johnson demonstrates that feminist theology can be deeply traditional while also profoundly liberative. Indeed, one might argue that her retrieval of Cappadocian relationality not only benefits feminist theology but also helps the wider Church recover dimensions of Trinitarian faith that have been obscured by later doctrinal developments.

While the Cappadocians emphasized the relational communion of the Trinity. Augustine of Hippo developed a different yet complementary approach by focusing on the inner life of God as a dynamic of love. His *De Trinitate* remains one of the most influential works in Western theology, offering a psychological and relational account of divine life.[66] Augustine

[65] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Trinity*, in *Select Writings and Letters*, NPNF2, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 141.

[66] Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., The Works of Saint Augustine, Part I, vol. 5 (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991) I.3.5.

proposed various analogies to help illuminate the mystery of the Trinity. His *psychological analogy*, understanding the Trinity through the unity and relationality of memory, intellect, and will reflects an inward, introspective model of divine communion. Among the most enduring is his description of God as lover, beloved and love. [67]In this triadic structure, the Father is the one who loves, the Son is the one who is loved, and the Holy Spirit is the bond of love between them.

While this model has often been criticized for its apparent individualism and rational abstraction, it also offers, as Johnson notes, profound insights into relationality and mutual indwelling (*circumincession*), which can be reinterpreted through a feminist lens.

Johnson acknowledges that Augustine's psychological model of the Trinity has often been interpreted as overly intellectual and individualistic, rooted in a male, rationalist anthropology. Yet she insists that beneath this surface lies a profound insight that divine life is inherently relational, an eternal communion of mutual knowing and loving.

Johnson finds Augustine's analogy particularly fruitful for feminist theology. First, it emphasized love as the essence of God's being, which resonates with her broader claim that God's mystery is best articulated through symbols of relationality rather than monarchical domination.[68] By portraying the Spirit as the shared love between Father and Son, Augustine disrupts models of divine life that are overly hierarchical. Johnson sees in this an opening for

[67] Augustine, *The Trinity* XV.17.31.

[68] Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 230.

a feminist reappropriation of Augustine, since love cannot be monopolized by patriarchal structures but inherently involves reciprocity and self-giving.[69]

At the same time, Johnson is careful not to gloss over Augustine's limitations. His context was deeply shaped by Neoplatonism and Roman patriarchy, and his writings reflect assumptions about women's nature that remain troubling. In *The Liberal Meaning of Genesis* for instance, Augustine argued that woman alone is not fully the image of God, but only in union with man does she reflect the divine.[70] Such views underscore the need for Johnson's hermeneutic critique. She acknowledges Augustine's theological brilliance while rejecting those aspects of his that perpetuate gender inequality.

Still Johnson insists that Augustine's imagery of God as triune love has enduring significance. By emphasizing relationality at the heart of divine being, Augustine provides a resource for reimaging Trinitarian theology in ways that affirm mutuality and equality. [71]

Augustine's doctrine of the *imago-Dei* – that humanity reflects the divine image through rationality and relationality has profoundly shaped Christian anthropology. [72]However, Augustine's prioritization of the rational soul over the body has often reinforced dualisms that devalue the embodied, feminine aspects of human existence. Johnson critiques this tendency but also reclaims Augustine's dynamic view of the image as one that grows toward

[69] Ibid., 231.

[70] Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, S.J. (New York: Newman Press, 1982) 9.5.9.

[71] Johnson, *She Who Is* 232.

[72] Augustine, De Trinitate, xiv,12

likeness with God through love. She extends this notion to a holistic anthropology that embraces embodiment, history, and community as integral to the imago Dei.

By insisting that both women and men equally reflect the divine image, Johnson corrects Augustine's implicit gender hierarchy. The *imago Dei* becomes a symbol of inclusive human dignity rather than intellectual superiority. In this way, Johnson's engagement with Augustine exemplifies her broader method, retrieving truth from within patriarchal framework to serve the cause of liberation.

Furthermore, Augustine's insistence on the ineffability of God, the recognition that no human concept can adequately capture divine mystery, aligns with Johnson's feminist insistence on the limits of theological language. [73]In both respects, Augustine offers more than a patriarchal inheritance, he provides building blocks for a more inclusive and liberating theology.

Johnson's feminist rereading of Augustine resonates with the work of other theologians who have engaged the Patristic tradition in similar ways.

Feminist contemporary Catholic theologian, Catherine Mowry LaCugna in her work, God for Us (1991) presents one of the most influential rearticulations of Trinitarian theology. While she critiques Augustine's psychological model for its inward turn, which she believes

[73] Augustine, *The Trinity* XV.5.7

obscured the Trinity's economic and relational dimensions, she nonetheless appreciates his insights that divine being is communion.[74]

For LaCugna, Augustine's failure was not in identifying relation as central to God's being, but in confining it within the human soul rather than expressing it in the life of the church and world. [75] Her feminist impulse is to restore the doctrine of the Trinity as a vision for right relationship, both divine and human.

In reclaiming Augustine's theology of desire, Sarah Coakley in her work, *God, Sexuality, and the Self* (2013) takes a more explicit contemplative and erotic approach to Augustine. His insistence that human longing (desiderium) points toward divine communion as a resource for integrating sexuality and spirituality in feminist theology. [76]

Coakley reads Augustine not merely as a rational theologian but as a mystic who recognised the transformative power of love and vulnerability. [77]In her interpretation, Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity becomes a vision of divine desire and self-giving love that disrupts patriarchal notions of domination.

[74] LaCugna, *God for Us*, 242.

[75] Ibid., 249.

[76] Ibid., 109.

[77] Ibid., 115.

Also, Patricia Wilson-Kastner, another catholic feminist theologian, in her writing, Faith, Feminism, and the Christ, acknowledges Augustine's complicity in patriarchal structures yet affirms his theological emphasis on mutuality and communion. [78]For Wilson-Kastner, Augustine's insistence that God is not a solitary being, but a relational unity provides a framework for envisioning human community as non-hierarchical and inclusive. [79]

Similarly, Carol Harrison suggests that Augustine's theology of love, when disentangled from patriarchal assumptions offers a potential framework for relational anthropology that aligns with feminist emphasis on mutuality and interdependence.[80]

These are not uncritical celebrations but attempts to show that Augustine's work is not completely closed to feminist concerns.

Moreover, in reviews and essay collections edited by Judith Stark titled, ''*Feminist Interpretations of Augustine''* reviewed in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, scholars note the theological riches in Augustine's work, his sense of moral psychology, his confessional approach, his reflections on desire, time, memory, and the inner life. These are viewed as potentially useful resources for feminist theology, even the ones that need careful reinterpretation.[81]

[78] Wilson-Kastner, Patricia, Faith, Feminism, and the Christ (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 68

[79] Ibid., 71.

[80] Harrison Carol, ''Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 114 - 16

[81] Stark, C. Judith, ed., Feminist Interpretations of Augustine (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), pp 5-12

In her recent work, ‘’*A Feminist Appraisal of Augustine’’*, Jane Duran (2007) claims that Augustine exhibits styles of thought and modes of inquiry that are feminist friendly. For example, she suggests in her abstract that Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God*, via their style, use of unity, and introspective approach, offer openings for feminist re-engagement.[82]

From my perspective, Johnson's engagement with Augustine illustrates her method at its best, she neither dismisses him as irredeemably patriarchal nor venerates him uncritically. Instead, she discerns in his theology of love a profound resource for articulating a feminist understanding of God. What is striking is that Johnson's retrieval does not merely rehabilitate Augustine for feminist purposes, it also helps the wider Church recover dimensions of his theology that challenge any reduction of God to an image of solitary power. Augustine's vision of God as relational love, reframed in inclusive language, remains a gift for theology today.

Elizabeth Johnson's and other feminist theologians' engagement with Augustine of Hippo demonstrates the creative potential of a hermeneutics of retrieval. Their work reveals that even within the patriarchal structures of early Christian theology, there exist seeds of relationality, equality, and communion that can be cultivated for feminist ends. Augustine's theology of the Trinity once a symbol of metaphysical hierarchy becomes a vision of divine relationality that grounds human community in mutual love.

[82] Duran Jane, ‘’A Feminist Appraisal of Augustine, ‘’Religious Studies 50, no. 4 (2024), pp 545-56

A central thread running through Johnson's appropriation of the Patristic tradition is her feminist reworking of two core theological categories, relationality and transcendence. For Johnson, these concepts are not merely abstract doctrines but lenses through which the Christian understanding of God can be reimagined in ways that affirms both divine mystery and human dignity. [83]In retrieving these themes from the fathers, Johnson draws out their liberative potential while rejecting patriarchal distortions that have too often weaponized divine transcendence to justify male domination.

From the Cappadocians, Johnson reclaims the vision of the divine relationality as constitutive of God's being. Their insistence that God is not a solitary monad, but a communion of persons resonates with Johnson's feminist emphasis on mutuality, community, and love. [84]For Johnson, this insight challenges hierarchal models of God that have historically been mirrored in ecclesial and social orders, where male authority was justified as reflecting the supposed ''monarchy'' of the Father.[85] By emphasizing the perichoretic equality of the divine persons, Johnson demonstrates that relationality, rather than hierarchy, is the true image of God.

At the same time, Johnson insists on the importance of divine transcendence, though she interprets it in a distinctively feminist key. In *She Who Is*, she argues that transcendence should not be understood as divine remoteness, power, or patriarchal sovereignty. Instead,

[83] Johnson, *She Who Is. 247*

[84] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 31*. 321.

[85] LaCugna, Catherine Mowry, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. 270.

drawing from Augustine's insistence on the ineffability of God, she stresses that transcendence points to the incomprehensive mystery of God that no human concept least of all exclusively male imagery can capture. Its redefinition allows transcendence to function as a critical principle if God always exceeds human symbols, then no gendered metaphor, however traditional, can be absolutized.

Johnson thus holds relationality and transcendence together in a dialectical balance. On the one hand, relationality emphasizes God's nearness, communion, and presence, on the other transcendence safeguards divine mystery and resists reduction to finite categories. [86]In this way, she avoids the danger of collapsing God into human relationships while also resisting the opposite danger of portraying God as a distant, patriarchal sovereign.

In my view, Johnson's feminist reworking of these categories is both compelling and necessary. The Christian tradition has too often misinterpreted transcendence in ways that reinforce exclusionary power structures, portraying God as a solitary King whose authority validates patriarchal rule. Johnson's insistence that transcendence means mystery, an excess beyond all human grasp strips away and opens theological space for inclusive symbols of God. At the same time, her emphasis on relationality as constitutive of divine being provides a theological warrant for mutuality, equality, and solidarity within human communities. In retrieving these Patristic themes, Johnson shows how ancient theological insights can be transformed into liberating symbols for the present.

[86] Johnson, *She Who Is* 249–50.

Among the most creative aspects of Johnson's engagement with the Patristic tradition is her retrieval of pneumatology, the theology of the Holy Spirit. Historically, the Spirit has often been the ''forgotten'' person of the Trinity in Western theology, overshadowed by Christological and Father centred emphasis. [87]For Johnson, this neglect is symptomatic of patriarchal tendencies that privilege masculine -coded symbols of authority while sidelining more fluid, life giving, and dynamic aspects of the divine. Her feminist theology seeks to reclaim the Spirit as a vital resource for envisioning God in inclusive and liberating ways.

Johnson draws on Patristic sources that highlight the Spirit's role as the bond of communion and the giver of life. Augustine famously described the Spirit as the shared love between Father and Son. [88]While Johnson acknowledges the patriarchal context of Augustine's thought, she finds in this imagery an opening for reimaging the Spirit as the divine energy of relationality and love that pervades creation. In a feminist key, this disrupts hierarchical images of God by emphasizing reciprocity, mutuality, and vitality. [89]

The Cappadocians also provide Johnson with a rich resource for pneumatology. Basil of Casarea, in *On the Holy Spirit*, insisted on the Spirits full divinity, resisting attempts to reduce the Spirit to a secondary or subordinate status. [90]Johnson retrieves this affirmation

[87] Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 1, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1983) 15.

[88] Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., The Works of Saint Augustine, Part I, vol. 5 (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991) XV.17.31.

[89] Johnson, *She Who Is 127-128.*

[90] Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980) 16.38.

of the Spirit's equality as a crucial corrective to hierarchical patterns that have marginalized not only the Spirit but also, by analogy, women within the life of the Church. By emphasizing the Spirit's Co-equal divinity, Johnson underscores that the fulness of God is dynamic, relational and not reducible to patriarchal authority.

Moreover, Johnson creatively expands the Patristic tradition by reintegrating feminist symbols of Spirit. She notes that in both Hebrew (*rauch*) and Syriac traditions, the term for the Spirit is grammatically feminine, offering a precedent for speaking of the Spirit in explicitly female imagery. [91]Drawing on these traditions, Johnson portrays the Spirit as *Sophia*, the wisdom of God, and as She who brings forth life, nurtures, and sustains creation. [92] In this way, her pneumatology not only reclaims Patristic insights but also broadens them by recovering suppressed biblical and early Christian images of God in feminine form.

In my opinion, Johnson's feminist pneumatology represents one of the most compelling demonstrations of her method of retrieval and critique. She shows that Patristic theology, while undeniably marked by patriarchal contexts, contains seeds of insights that can be cultivated into a theology of the Spirit that is life-affirming, relational, and inclusive. Her use of feminine imagery for the Spirit is not a rejection of tradition but a recovery of dimensions that were always present, though often marginalized. This retrieval, in turn, offers the contemporary Church a more holistic and expansive vision of the God who is Spirit- ever-present, dynamic, and liberating.

[91] Trible Phyllis, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) 17–18.

[92] Johnson, *She Who Is* 135–36.

Johnson's engagement with the Patristic tradition is both ambitious and creative. By retrieving Cappadocian and Augustinian insights while simultaneously reworking them through a feminist lens, she demonstrates that the tradition can be a living resource rather than a static inheritance. Yet this strategy raises important questions about the extent to which Patristic theology can genuinely be reclaimed for feminist purposes and whether Johnson's method risks projecting contemporary concerns onto ancient sources. A critical evaluation of her project reveals both its enduring strengths and its potential limitations. One of Johnson's greatest strength lies in her refusal to abandon the tradition.

Some feminist theologians, particularly in the second wave, argued that the Christian theological heritage was so compromised by patriarchy that it could not be salvaged. [93]Johnson, however, insists on remaining within the tradition, convinced that fidelity to the Church's heritage need not entail submission to its patriarchal distortions.[94] This stance is both pastorally and theologically significant, as it reassures communities of faith that feminist theology is not a rejection of Christianity but a faithful retrieval of its deepest truths.

Another strength of Johnson's approach is her ability to highlight genuinely liberative elements in the Fathers. Her retrieval of Cappadocian relationality and Augustinian love

[93] Daly Mary, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) 19.

[94] Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 29–30.

demonstrates that Patristic theology was not monolithically patriarchal but contained resources for envisioning God in terms of communion, reciprocity, and mystery. [95]
By placing these themes in dialogue with feminist concerns, Johnson shows that the fathers can speak powerfully to contemporary issues of equality, justice and inclusivity. This contributes not only to feminist theology but also to the renewal of Trinitarian theology more broadly.

Yet there are limits to Johnson's strategy. Some critics argue that her method risks ''cherry-picking'' Patristic insights that resonate with contemporary concerns while downplaying those aspects that remain problematic.[96] For instance, while Augustine's theology of love is profound, his views on women were deeply patriarchal and cannot simply be bracketed off. Similarly, the Cappadocians' relational model of the Trinity was still articulated within a framework of androcentric language and patriarchal culture. Johnson acknowledges these limitations, but her constructive retrieval may at times underestimate the dept of their embeddedness.

A further challenge arises from the question of historical context. The Fathers were not writing in response to feminist concerns but to controversies of their own time, such as Arianism. To recontextualize their theology in a feminist key is necessarily an act of creative reappropriation. While this is not illegitimate indeed, all theology involves reinterpretation,

[95] LaCugna, Catherine Mowry, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1991) 272.

[96] Coakley Sarah, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 88–89.

it does raise the question of whether Johnson's project represents continuity with the fathers or a significant reconfiguration. [97]

However, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) publicly censured '*Quest for the Living God*' *i*n 2011, claiming that Johnson's method ''employs standards of inquiry that do not accord with authentic Catholic teaching.'' The bishops objected particularly to her reimagining of divine naming, fearing it undermined the transcendence and immutability of God.[98] But Johnson's response clarified that her intent was not to replace doctrine but to articulate the living mystery of God in conversation with conversation with contemporary experience, including the voices of women and marginalized people.[99]

This exchange illustrates the ongoing tension between feminist theological renewal and institutional boundaries within Catholicism.

In my opinion, these criticisms do not undermine Johnson's project but highlight its boldness. She does not claim to reproduce the fathers unaltered writings, but to retrieve their liberative insights for a new context. In doing so, she exemplifies a living tradition, one that is not frozen in the fourth or fifth centuries but continually renewed in dialogue with contemporary concerns. The true measure of Johnson's achievement is not whether her reading of the Fathers is historically ''pure'' but whether it enables the Church to proclaim

[97] Hart David Bentley, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 145

[98] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Doctrine: Review of Quest for the Living God by Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ (Washington, D.C: USCCB, 2011), 3-5

[99] Johnson A. Elizabeth, ''Response to the USCCB Statement on Quest for the Living God, America Magazine, June 7, 2011

the mystery of God in ways that are faithful, liberating, and inclusive. On this measure, her retrieval of the Patristic tradition is both necessary and fruitful.

In her engagement with the Patristic tradition, Elizabeth Johnson demonstrate that feminist theology can be both faithful to the Christian past and transformative for the present. Her method of retrieval and critique allows her to discern liberative resources in the writings of the Fathers while resisting those elements that perpetuate patriarchal exclusion. By doing so, Johnson situates feminist theology not outside but within the stream of Christian tradition, showing that it continues the Church's deepest impulse to proclaim the mystery of God in new ways.[100]

The Cappadocians, with their emphasis on divine relationality and perichoretic communion, provide Johnson with a vision of God that resists monarchical hierarchy and instead affirms mutually and equality. Augustine, with his profound reflections on love and divine ineffability, offer Johnon a theological framework in which God' mystery cannot be reduced any single metaphor or image, least of all an exclusively masculine one. [101] In both cases, Johnon retrieves what is life-giving while critically rejecting patriarchal residues.

At the heart of her project lies a reconfiguration of relationality and transcendence. Johnson affirms that God is not a solitary patriarch enthroned in isolation but a communion of love

[100] Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 29–30.

[101] Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., The Works of Saint Augustine, Part I, vol. 5 (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991) XV.17.31.

whose transcendence signifies not distance or domination but inexhaustible mystery. This reinterpretation not only serves feminist concerns but also enriches the broader Church's understanding of Trinitarian doctrine.

From my perspective, Johnson's work models how theology can be both historically rooted and critically innovative. While her project is not without risks such as the danger of over-contextualizing the fathers for modern concerns, it represents a vital contribution to contemporary theology. By reclaiming tradition in a feminist key, Johnson demonstrates that the voices of the Fathers, when critically engaged, can still speak meaningfully to questions of justice, equality, and the mystery of God.

This chapter has traced Johnson's use of Patristic sources in detail, from her methodological commitments to her constructive retrieval of Cappadocian and Augustinian insights. The following chapter will build on this foundation by exploring how Johnson critiques and expands Trinitarian doctrine itself, reimagining it in explicitly feminist terms while remaining faithful to the Christian confession of one GOD in three persons.

CHAPTER 4

Critiquing and Expanding Trinitarian Doctrine: Elizabeth Johnson's Feminist Reinterpretation

The doctrine of the Trinity has long stood as Christianity's central mystery. Yet for much of its history, its interpretation has been deeply entangled with patriarchal assumptions, symbolized above all in the exclusive naming of God as ''Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.'' Feminist theology has consistently challenged the gendered implications of this tradition, and Johnson has emerged as one of the most creative interpreters. In her major work She Who Is, as well as in subsequent writings, Johnson both critiques the androcentric inheritance of trinitarian doctrine and proposes constructive alternatives rooted in feminist theological imagination.

This chapter evaluates Johnson's contribution, focusing on three interrelated dimensions. First is her analysis of the power of symbolic language, second is her challenge to androcentric formulations of God and third, her alternative models for divine relationality.

In what follows, I argue that Johnson's theology represents one of the most the most effective attempts to hold together fidelity to Christian tradition with radical openness to feminist critique. Yet her approach is not without tension, while her retrieval of alternative symbols is imaginative and pastorally fruitful, it also raises the question of how much innovation the tradition can absorb without losing its continuity. In my view, Johnson successfully demonstrates that the Christian imagination can expand without rupturing, even if some of her proposals remain contested within ecclesial boundaries.

At the heart of Johnson's feminist rethinking of the Trinity lies a profound awareness of the power of language. Following Paul Ricoeur's insight that ''the symbol gives rise to thought'', [102]she insists that theological symbols are never neutral. They not only describe divine reality but also shape human consciousness, religious practise, and social structures. If God is consistently imagined as male, then men are tacitly elevated as the normative image of the divine.

In *She Who Is*, Johnson argues that exclusive masculine naming of God amounts to an 'Idolatry'' that distorts the incomprehensive ''mystery of God''. [103]By reducing the divine mystery to one gendered metaphor, theology has historically reinforced male dominance both in church and society. Her use of the language of idolatry is striking, for it signals that androcentric symbols do not merely fall short, they obstruct authentic worship by projecting human patriarchy onto the divine.

At the heart of Johnson's theology lies a profound conviction about the power of symbols. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's insight that ''the symbol gives rise to thought,'' she insists that theological symbols are never neutral. [104]They shape not only intellectual discourse but also the lived experience of faith. When God is named primarily as 'Father', Christian communities inevitably internalize an association between divinity and maleness, thereby reinforcing patterns of patriarchy.

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[102] Ricoeur Paul, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 348.

[103] Johnson, *She Who Is 98*

[104] Ricoeur Paul, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 347.

Johnson argues that the problem is not in using masculine metaphors for God but in the exclusive and normative use of such language. 'If women are made in the image of God, ''she writes in *She Who Is*, ''then female metaphors must be recognized as equally valid ways of speaking about divine reality.[105] Accordingly, she advocates for a multiplicity of metaphors drawn from both male and female experience. Among the most important is the retrieval of biblical and patristic imagery of **Sophia** – divine wisdom whom Johnson identifies with the second person of the Trinity. Sophia language not only enriches the symbolic supply but also disrupts the androcentric narrowing of divine mystery.

I find Johnson's symbolic approach persuasive. Symbols indeed shape consciousness, and the refusal to employ feminine metaphors for God implicitly devalues women's experience. Her retrieval of Sophia is particularly powerful because it is not a modern invention but a recovery of deeply rooted biblical imagery. By grounding her innovations in scripture and tradition, Johnson avoids the charge of projecting modern feminist concerns onto theology without precedent. Yet some questions remain. Does the proliferation of metaphors risk fragmenting the coherence of trinitarian doctrine? Johnson argues that multiplicity more faithfully reflects divine clarity.

Personally, I find her response convincing: if God is ultimately beyond comprehension, then no single metaphor can ever suffice, and a pluralism of images better safeguards transcendence.

[105] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 41.

Johnson's critique of androcentrism is most visible in her challenge to the traditional trinitarian formula of 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'. She does not deny the biblical of historical legitimacy of this formula but resists its exclusivity. ''When this language is used as the sole or even the primary way of naming the Trinity, she argues, ''it inevitably conveys the impression that God is male''[106]. Some may argue, it is an intellectual error, reinforcing gender hierarchies within both church and society.

As an alternative, Johnson proposes the use of inclusive trinitarian formulations, such as ''Spirit-Sophia. Jesus-Sophia, Mother-Sophia''[107]. Such language both honours tradition and expands it. By incorporating female imagery and symbols of wisdom, Johnson challenges the implicit gender bias that has long shaped Christian discourse.

This strategy has not been without controversy. Critics argue that altering the baptismal formula risks severing continuity with the historic church. Johnson responds that her intention is not to replace the classical formula but to supplement it, allowing the richness of divine mystery to be expressed in new ways. In my opinion, this supplemental strategy is wise. It avoids a stark rupture with tradition while nevertheless pressing toward inclusive and liberative expressions of faith.

[106] Ibid., 72

[107] Ibid., 98

Comparatively, Johnson's approach diverges from that of Mary Daly, who rejected Christian symbols altogether, declaring that ''if God is male, then male is God.'' [108]While Daly's critique was necessary in exposing the patriarchal underpinnings of theology, Johnson offers a more constructive path for communities who wish to remain within Christian tradition. I would argue that this balance of critique and retrieval makes Johnson's project pastorally a more fruitful Christian tradition.

Beyond language, Johson also reimagines the very relational structure of trinitarian doctrine. Drawing on the Cappadocian Fathers, she emphasizes that God is not a solitary monarch, but a communion of persons bound together in mutual love. Johnson appropriates this insight while rejecting its historical entanglement with patriarchal hierarchies. Her reinterpretation envisions the Trinity as a model of egalitarian relationality. If God's very being is constituted by mutuality rather than domination, then human relationships especially between women and men are called to reflect that same pattern of equality. ''The symbol of the Trinity.'' She writes, ''envisions divine life as a community of equals in mutual love.''[109]

I find this vision both theologically profound and socially relevant. It situates feminist concerns for justice and equality not at the periphery but at the very heart of Christian doctrine. By reimagining the Trinity as an egalitarian communion, Johnson provides a powerful theological warrant for resisting structures of oppression. Still, one might ask

[108] Daly Mary, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 19.

[109] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 222

whether Johnson's reinterpretation risks projecting modern egalitarian ideals onto the doctrine. My own view is that such contextual reinterpretation is not only inevitable but desirable. Christian doctrine has always developed in response to new historical and cultural challenges; Johnson's work is an extension of this dynamic.

Johnson's feminist reinterpretation of the Trinity is marked by both continuity and innovation. On the one hand, she grounds her proposals in classical theology, drawing on the Cappadocians' emphasis on relationality, Augustine's insights on love, and biblical figures such as Sophia. On the other hand, she presses these sources in new directions, expanding symbolic language to include female imagery and egalitarian metaphors. When viewed against the broader landscape of feminist theology, Johnson's contribution appears distinctive.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, for instance, has long critiqued the very framework of trinitarian doctrine as irredeemably compromised by patriarchy, suggesting that Christian theology must be reconstructed at a more radical level, often outside trinitarian categories.[110] Johnson by contrast, insists that the Trinity remains a vital locus of Christian faith, rather than abandoning it, she works to retrieve and expand it. In my view, Johnson's approach offers a more pastorally constructive strategy. While Reuther's radical critique is powerful, it risks severing communities from their inherited faith symbols. Johnson demonstrates that transformation can occur within tradition rather than only beyond it.

[110] Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 70–85.

Catherine LaCugna provides another instructive comparison. In *God for Us* (1991), LaCugna emphasizes the inseparability of the ''economic'' and ''immanent'' Trinity, arguing that God is best understood as a communion of persons revealed in salvation history.[111] Johnson echoes this emphasis on relationality but adds a specifically feminist dimension by challenging androcentric imagery and supplementing it with female metaphors. I would argue that Johnson builds upon LaCugna's insights, showing that if divine relationality is truly egalitarian then language about God must reflect the full diversity of human experience, including the feminine.

Mary Daly, by contrast, famously declared ''if God is male, then male is God,'' [112] and abandoned the Christian tradition altogether. Her critique was uncompromising, rejecting trinitarian doctrine as a patriarchal construct. Johnson is deeply aware of Daly's challenge, yet she charts a different course, rather than leaving the Christian symbolic system, she engages in what she calls ''*critical retrieval*'' of tradition. Personally, I find Johnson's approach more constructive for communities of faith. Daly's critique was necessary to exposé theological complicity with patriarchy, but Johnson demonstrates that Christian symbols are not monolithic, they can be interpreted in liberating ways.

Phyllis Trible, though not primarily a trinitarian theologian emphasizes the re-reading of scripture through a feminist hermeneutic of remembrance.[113] Johnson's retrieval of Sophia

[111] LaCugna, Catherine Mowry, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 221–44.

[112] Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 19.

[113] Trible Phyllis, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1–24.

imagery resonates with Trible's strategy, both search within the biblical tradition for neglected symbols that can reorient theology. Yet Johnson goes further by systematically integrating such symbols into the core of trinitarian doctrine. Finally, Sarah Coakley represents a different trajectory in feminist trinitarian theology. In *God, Sexuality, and the Self* (2013), Coakley emphasizes the role of prayer and desire in shaping trinitarian understanding, stressing the importance of spiritual practice alongside doctrinal reformulation. [114]Johnson shares Coakley's concern for the transformative power of symbols in the life of prayer, though Johnson's focus remains more on doctrinal expansion and symbolic plurality. I find both approaches complementary, Johnson ensures theological discourse is inclusive and liberative, while Coakley reminds us that doctrine must also be embodied in practices of worship and contemplation.

Taken together, these comparisons highlight the uniqueness of Johnson's position. Unlike Daly or Reuther, she refuses to abandon trinitarian doctrine. Unlike LaCgna, she explicitly foregrounds feminist concerns. Unlike Trible, she embeds scriptural retrieval into systematic theology. Unlike Caokley, she privileges doctrinal reformation over mystical ascent. In my opinion, Johnson thus occupies a middle ground, radical enough to challenge androcentric structures, yet faithful enough to remain within the tradition's boundaries. This balance is precisely what makes her work both controversial and fruitful.

[114] Coakley Sarah, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay "On the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 45–78

Johnson's methodology marked by a hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance, critical retrieval of neglected symbols, and sustained critique of androcentric language, allows her to speak both to the academy and to the life of the church. By pressing the classical doctrine of the Trinity toward inclusive and egalitarian horizons, Johnson demonstrates that tradition can be a resource for liberation rather than an obstacle to it.

Placed in conversation with other feminist theologians, her contribution becomes even clearer. Mary Daly and Delores Williams remind us that symbols can be so damaging that they risk legitimating oppression. Rosemary Radford Ruether presses for reconstruction beyond trinitarian categories, while Phyllis Trible demonstrates the critical power of deconstruction without necessarily constructing alternatives. Catherine LaCugna underscores the centrality of relationality, though without Johnson's feminist expansion of imagery, and Sarah Coakley situates the Trinity in the lived practice of prayer and desire.

Against this backdrop, Johnson's work is distinctive, she dares to remain within the trinitarian framework yet radically reimagines its content to reflect women's full humanity. In my view, this balance of retrieval and critique is Johnson's greatest strength. Unlike Daly's rejectionist strategy, Johnson offers a path for communities who wish to remain rooted in Christian faith while resisting its patriarchal distortions. Unlike Ruether's sweeping reconstruction, she shows that even the central dogma of the Trinity can be opened to liberating reinterpretation. Johnson's symbolic creativity especially her retrieval of Sophia as a name for the divine, and her insistence that God's relationality must be described through

inclusive, non-hierarchical language, keeps theology faithful to its past while ensuring relevance for present and future believers.

Personally, I find Johnson's approach deeply compelling. It acknowledges the wounds caused by patriarchal theology without conceding that the only answer is abandonment. It calls for an active reshaping of theological discourse, in which women's voices, metaphors, and experiences are not peripheral but constitutive. Her reinterpretation of the Trinity exemplifies how doctrine can serve as a living tradition capable of transformation when confronted with the demands of justice.

Chapter Five

Evaluating Influence: Continuity and Transformation

The preceding chapters have traced Elizabeth Johnson's feminist theology of the Trinity, focusing on her hermeneutical method, her symbolic use of language, and her constructive reinterpretation of the doctrine. This final chapter conclusively, evaluate the degree to which Johnson's theology reflects continuity with, and transformation of the Patristic tradition. By situating her work in relation to Key patristic voices especially the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine, it becomes possible to measure both her indebtedness to the tradition and the creative distance she takes to reimagine it in a feminist key.

This chapter proceeds in three stages. First, it considers Johnson's continuity with the patristic tradition, highlighting her critical retrieval of concepts such as divine relationality, transcendence, and wisdom imagery. Second, it turns to the transformations Johnson introduces, particularly her feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, her pluralization of divine language, and her egalitarian models of relationality. Finally, it evaluates the theological and pastoral significance of this dynamic of continuity and transformation, assessing whether Johnson's reinterpretation represents fidelity, rupture, or a living development of tradition.

One of the striking features of Johnson's theology is her refusal to abandon Christian tradition. Unlike Mary Daly, who advocated for a complete departure from patriarchal Christianity. [115]Johnson insists on working from within drawing deeply on scripture and

[115] Daly Mary, *Beyond God the Father*, 19.

tradition. In this respect, she shares an affinity with the patristic writers, who themselves were engaged in reinterpretation of inherited symbols for their contexts.

Johnson's most obvious point of continuity lies in her affirmation of the Cappadocian vision of God as a communion of persons. Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus developed the doctrine of perichoresis, the mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.[116] Johnson appropriates this framework, highlighting that divine being is constituted by relationality rather than solitary supremacy. In her work, She Who Is, she echoes the Cappadocians when she insists that ''God is not an absolute monarch but a community of equals in mutual love. [117]

In my judgement, the continuity strengthens her theology. By grounding her feminist emphasis on egalitarian relationships in Cappadocian thought, Johnson demonstrates that her innovations are not arbitrary impositions but extensions of an ancient vision. The Cappadocian themselves challenged the monarchical models of God prevalent in their time; Johnson continues that critical trajectory in the face of patriarchy.

Johnson also engages with Augustine's trinitarian theology, particularly his analogy of God as Lover, beloved, and love itself in *De Trinitate.*[118] While she critiques Augustine's

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[116] Gregory of Nyssa, *On "Not Three Gods"*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 334–36.

[117] Johnson, *She Who Is.*, 222.

[118] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), 15.7.11.

tendency toward psychological individualism, she retains his central insight that God's being is constituted by love. For Johnson, divine love is not hierarchical but mutual and it grounds her feminist vision of relational equality.

Here again I see strong continuity. Johnson reinterprets Augustine's insight through a feminist lens, but she preserves the heart of his theological vision; God is love in relation.

Perhaps the most creative continuity lies in Johnson's retrieval of Sophia, the biblical and patristic figure of divine Wisdom. Early Christian theologians, including Origen and Athanasius, identified Christ with Sophia, though this imagery was gradually eclipsed by more exclusively masculine titles.[119] Johnson's reclamation of Sophia as a name for the second person of the Trinity is therefore not a modern invention but a recovery of a neglected strand of tradition.

This move is particularly significant. By rooting her feminist symbols in biblical and patristic precedent, Johnson disarms the charge of inventing novelty. She demonstrates that the tradition itself contains resources for inclusive language that were obscured by later androcentric emphases.

[119] Origen, *Commentary on John*, Book I, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 9, ed. Allan Menzies (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 303–4.

If Johnson's theology shows deep continuity with patristic sources, it also involves radical transformation. Indeed, her project cannot be understood merely as retrieval, it is also a reimaging of the tradition considering feminist critique.

Johnson employs a hermeneutics of suspicion, exposing the patriarchal distortions that have shaped Christian theology. While patristic thinkers often assumed hierarchal social orders, Johnson refuses to take such structures as normative.

She interrogates not only what the fathers said but also the silences and exclusions in their discourse. For example, while Gregory of Hyssa's vision of divine infinity provides resources for transcendence, Johnson resists the patriarchal frameworks that limited women's participation in theology. [120] This hermeneutical suspicion marks a decisive transformation. The Fathers interpreted tradition to their contexts, Johnson does the same, but in a context where women's exclusion must be named and challenged.

The most visible transformation is Johnson's expansion of divine language. Whereas patristic theology predominantly used masculine terms for God, Johnson insists on a plurality of metaphors, especially feminine ones. Her trinitarian formulations – ''Spirit-Sophia'', Jesus-Sophia, Mother-Sophia'',[121] represent a symbolic shift of profound consequence.

[120] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), II.163–70.

[121] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 98.

This transformation responds to contemporary concerns but also destabilizes entrenched assumptions about the male God. In my view, this is the most radical and necessary aspect of her theology. Symbols shape imagination, and by altering the symbolic repertoire, Johnson challenges centuries of gender bias in Christian worship.

Finally, Johnson transforms the patristic vision of divine relationality by stripping it of hierarchical overtones. While the Cappadocians spoke of mutuality, their social metaphors often reflected hierarchical structures of their world. Johnson reimagines perichoresis as a communion of equals, a model that inspires feminist visions of social justice and ecclesial reform.

This re-reading is transformative because it presses the tradition beyond what the fathers themselves could imagine. Yet, as Johnson herself notes, such expansion is consistent with the dynamic character of tradition as a tradition as a living process rather than a static deposit.[122]

The interplay of continuity and transformation in Johnson's theology raises the central question: to what extent has the Patristic tradition influenced her feminist reinterpretation of the Trinity?

[122] Ibid, 38.

I would argue that Johnson exemplifies what Yves Congar described as the living tradition of the church, continuity without stasis, development without rupture.[123] Her theology is not a rejection of patristic insights but a reworking of them to address new contexts. The Cappadocians relational ontology. Augustine's theology of love, and Sophia imagery all serve as building blocks for her feminist construction. Yet these are not repeated uncritically, they are reshaped through suspicion, critique, and reimaging.

From one angle, Johnson is deeply faithful to the fathers. She retains their insistence that God is relational, mysterious, and beyond capture in human language. From another angle, she is profoundly innovative, insisting that only inclusive and egalitarian reinterpretation can make these doctrines credible today.

Personally, I find this balance compelling. A theology that merely repeats patristic formulas risks irrelevance, one that entirely severs from tradition risks alienation from the church. Johnson navigates between these extremes, offering a theology that is at once rooted and radical.

Theologically, Johnson's work demonstrates that the Trinity can serve as a locus of liberation rather than oppression. Pastorally, it opens space for women and marginalized communities to recognize themselves in the language of faith. This is not merely academic, it reshapes worship, prayer, and the imagination of God's people.

[123] Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A. N. Woodrow (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 19–23.

At the same time, some challenges remain. Johnson's pluralization of divine symbols, while powerful, may create dissonance for communities deeply attached to traditional formulas. Critics may fear fragmentation of doctrinal identity. I believe this tension is inevitable but also creative, it pushes the church to discern how fidelity and reform can coexist.

Elizabeth Johnson's feminist theology of the Trinity exemplifies a dynamic engagement with the Patristic tradition. On the side of continuity, she appropriates the Cappadocians relational ontology, Augustine's theology of love, and the neglected wisdom tradition. On the side of transformation, she subjects these sources to feminist suspicion, expands the symbolic range of God-language, and reimagines relationality as egalitarian communion.

The Patristic tradition has therefore influenced Johnson profoundly, but not as a static authority to be repeated uncritically. Rather, it has functioned as a resource to be engaged. Critiqued, and reconfigured considering new historical realities. Johnson's work demonstrates that the tradition can be both a source of fidelity and a site of transformation.

In my judgement, this is the lasting significance of Johnson's theology, she models a way of doing Christian theology that is faithful to its past while open to the future, critical of distortion yet hopeful of renewal. Her feminist reinterpretation of the Trinity is thus not a departure from the Patristic tradition but a living development of it, continuity through transformation.

In conclusion, Chapter's one and two established the methodological foundations of feminist theology and situated Johnson within this landscape. Feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Daly, and Phyllis Trible laid the groundwork for a hermeneutic of suspicion and remembrance, critiquing patriarchal theology while retrieving overlooked biblical and historical resources. Johnson aligns with this trajectory but distinguishes herself by her constructive engagement with trinitarian doctrine rather than its abandonment.

This chapter also demonstrated that Johnson's approach resonates with Catherine LaCugna's emphasis on the Trinity as relational and economic, while pressing further by expanding the symbolic repertoire of God-language. Her feminist methodology is therefore not a departure from the field but a distinctive contribution within it.

In chapter Three, the focus was on Johnson's explicit engagement with Patristic theology. It highlighted her retrieval of the Cappadocian emphasis on relationality and perichoresis, Augustine's vision of God as love, and the patristic tradition of Sophia. These elements reveal Johnson's continuity with early Christian thought, showing that her theology is not built on rejection but on critical appropriation.

At the same time, this chapter also noted Johnson's hermeneutical suspicion, she acknowledges the patriarchal blind spots of the Fathers, their reliance on hierarchical social structures, and the androcentric narrowing of divine imagery. My own evaluation emphasized that Johnson's creativity lies in her ability to claim what is liberative while resisting what is oppressive. She does not simply reproduce patristic voices but re-voices them for a new context.

Chapter Four analysed Johson's constructive reinterpretation of the Trinity. Three central themes emerged, her use of symbolic language, her challenged to androcentric formulations, and her egalitarian models of relationality. Johnson expands the repertoire of divine names to include feminine metaphors such as Sophia, thereby destabilizing the symbolic identification of God as a communion of equals whose relationality can inspire human community.

In evaluating Johnson's contributions alongside other feminist theologians, the chapter demonstrated both convergences and divergences. Johnson shares with LaCugna an emphasis on relationality, with Trible a retrieval of neglected symbols, and with Coakley an attentiveness to prayer and practice. Yet unlike Ruether or Daly, Johnson remains firmly within trinitarian categories, insisting that the tradition can be reformed from within. In my judgement, this balance of fidelity and innovation is precisely what makes her work so significant for both academic and ecclesial contexts.

Chapter five offered a sustained evaluation of continuity and transformation. It concluded that Johnson is deeply influenced by the Patristic tradition but not bound by it. She retrieves Cappadocian relationality, Augustinian love, and wisdom imagery, but subjects them to feminist suspicion and expansion. The Patristic tradition functions for her not as a closed authority but as a living resource to be critiqued and reimagined.
Here I argued that Johnson exemplifies the ''living tradition'' described by Yves Congar, faithful to the past yet open to development. Her theology demonstrates that continuity

with tradition does not preclude transformation, and indeed that transformation may be the most faithful response to the Spirit's call in a new historical context.

The findings of this dissertation suggest several important theological conclusions. Johnson's work undermines any view of tradition as static repetition. By showing that patristic insights can be retrieved and reshaped, she demonstrates that tradition is dynamic, marked by both continuity and discontinuity. This challenges both traditionalists, who fear change as betrayal, and radicals, who see tradition as irredeemable.

Johnson's insistence on plural metaphors for God reveals that language is never neutral but always shapes imagination. Expanding divine language to include female imagery is therefore not cosmetic but transformative. It affects how communities pray, how they imagine God, and how they relate to one another. This point is particularly important in a feminist context, where exclusive male imagery has legitimized the subordination of women.

Finally, Johnson's reinterpretation of the Trinity demonstrate that doctrine can serve liberative purposes. Too often, trinitarian theology has been abstracted from lived concerns. Johnson shows that the Trinity, when envisioned as an egalitarian communion of equals, can become a model for social justice, mutuality, and equality. In my judgement, this is one of her most important contributions, a theology that concerns classical doctrine with contemporary struggles for dignity.

While this dissertation has focused on Johnson, her work opens questions for future theological development.

First, it raises the challenge of reception. How can inclusive trinitarian language be introduced into liturgy and catechesis without alienating communities attached to traditional formulas? I would argue that pastoral sensitivity is required, but so is courage, without change, theology risks perpetuating harmful images.

Second, Johnson's methodology suggests that feminist theology should continue to engage tradition critically rather than reject it wholesale. The patristic writings remain a treasury of theological insight, even if they must be sifted through suspicion. Future feminist theologians may continue to unearth neglected resources perhaps from Eastern Christianity, desert monasticism, non-Western patristic voices that can further enrich the trinitarian imagination.

Finally, Johnson's work invites dialogue with other theological movement. Liberation theology, ecological theology, and interfaith theology all share her concerns for justice and inclusivity. By reimaging the Trinity in feminist terms, Johnson contributes to a broader conversation about how Christian doctrine can serve the flourishing of life in our time.

This dissertation set out to answer the question: *To what extent has the Patristic tradition influenced Elizabeth Johnson's feminist theology of the Trinity?*

The answer is complex but clear: Johnson is profoundly shaped by the patristic tradition, yet she reshapes it in ways the fathers themselves could not have imagined. Her theology is marked by continuity in its appropriation of relationality, love, and wisdom and by transformation in its suspicion of patriarchy, its expansion of language, and its egalitarian vision of divine relationality.

In my view, Johnson's achievement lies in demonstrating that Christian theology need not choose between fidelity and innovation. Her feminist reinterpretation of the Trinity shows that it is possible to honour the tradition while also exposing and overcoming its distortions. This dynamic of continuity and transformation is not a weakness but a strength, it reveals the vitality of theology as a discipline always in motion, responding to new contexts in the light of enduring faith.

For the church and academy alike, Johnson's theology offers hope. It suggests that even the most central doctrines can be reclaimed for liberation, that the language of faith can be expanded to reflect the fullness of human experience, and that tradition itself can be a source of justice rather than oppression. In this sense, Johnson's feminist theology of the Trinity is not only a contribution to contemporary theology but a model for its future, a theology both faithful and free

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