
God as Woman— Blasphemy or Blessing?

by James J. Londis

Being alone, especially at night, terrified Connie. In her nightmares she was chased by someone seeking to kill her. She had been raped.

Oddly enough it was someone she knew, someone she worked with and trusted. For a variety of reasons she had not reported it to the police. Instead, she had prayed for God to take away her shame.

“I feel so dirty. Perhaps I was dressed too sexy or acted too friendly or something. It was partly my fault. I don’t blame God for not hearing my prayers.”

This tendency to blame themselves rather than their assailants is also often exhibited by the battered wives I counsel. “I can’t understand what I’m doing to make my husband so mad at me,” one woman complained. “I’ll just have to be a better wife.”

Women whose marriages fail echo the same sense of responsibility. Carol believed that Jack was the priest of the family, the leader of the home. But she was never able to live up to his expectations for the kind of wife she was to be. The house was not clean enough, the food was not prepared on time, and her resistance to doing things the way he wanted them done irritated him greatly.

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“I don’t know why I can’t be the kind of wife God wants me to be,” she said. “Maybe I *am* stubborn. I don’t know . . .”

Long before the attack on Connie’s body, her mind had been raped; long before these wives were physically bruised their psyches had been battered; long before Carol and Jack’s separation their perceptions about male-female relationships had been distorted. These women clearly blamed themselves for the evils committed against them because deeply buried in our collective experience as Christians is the notion that the female of the species is the cause of sin, the seductress who lured the male to join her in rebellion against God. She is the reason the world is a place of suffering.

Once women accept responsibility for original sin, it is not difficult for them to blame themselves for every relationship problem they have with men. Should a woman resent being treated as an inferior to men or as a subordinate, she is reminded that when sin entered, she became subject to man. She is to enjoy his achievements and not her own, to be happy in his success and not seek any for herself. She is the “power behind the throne” never to occupy a throne of her own.

For some people, childbirth is the quintessential symbol of her guilt because, according to the Genesis record, it is to remind us that her selfishness brought pain to the world in its infancy. Whether she is

a black woman picking cotton on a hot day or a queen having her nails polished in the palace, her place is the same: she exists for a man in a way he does not exist for her. She is to be his "helpmeet," his "support" and "complement," and if she rebels against what seems to her to be an obvious injustice, she is told that it is *God* who ordered things this way. God wants her to accept her place in the established hierarchy of authority. If she does not, she will never find happiness.

Those women who do not find fulfillment in this supportive role argue that the subordination of women or any other group inevitably and necessarily leads to the exploitation of men and women. Women lose their freedom and thus their dignity if they must define themselves simply in relation to men, while men who subordinate women dehumanize themselves in the process.

Her labor belongs to him. To labor from before dawn to after dusk in his household is her purpose for existence. She has no need to read and write, no need to learn, to travel, to dream. Her sphere is defined, confined; she must not stray from it. . . . Her labor frees him for the momentous tasks of war and politics. He is known at the gates. She is not to be known in public. She is to remain invisible. When he returns in the evening, his food shall be ready, his clothes in order, his couch prepared. In this way her history is stolen from her. It is said that she did nothing. It is his achievements that we read about in books . . .

Early in the morning the army of . . . waitresses, secretaries, nurses, librarians, and teachers march from their houses. The morning chores are rushed, the children pressed through breakfast and off to school so that women can get to work at the same time as men whose women do these chores for them. On the job the women service male work: clean the offices, prepare the food, type the letters, answer the phones, research the studies.

Upon this pyramid of female labor the executive arises, seemingly imbued with superhuman wisdom and magnified power drawn from the combined force of a vast, invisible reservoir; he stands upon it commanding, pronouncing, deciding. . . .

At five o'clock the army of women scatter to markets, nurseries, and kitchens to prepare the home, so that, when the men return, the children are already fetched, the food bought and cooked, the house cleaned. The men linger to consolidate the networks that advance them on the ladder. Women, it is said, just can't compete; they lack what it takes, the drive, the ambition. . . .¹

After this statement was read to a study group at the Sligo Church, women's eyes moistened and men shook their heads in stunned recognition that there is indeed something awry at the core of male-female relationships. While some believe that the problem is with those women who are no longer content with the place God has assigned them, others insist that the will of God for women is being frustrated by men unwilling to relinquish their power over women. Because I agree with the latter group, both inside and outside the church I would be called a "feminist," that is, a person who believes that women should have social, political, and ecclesiastical rights equal to men. While men and women obviously have different functions in reproduction and parenting, a feminist would hold that those functions do not imply a difference in status or authority. Men and women are all "persons" enjoying a humanity enriched by the lives they share.

Because of my experience as a pastor, I am forced to wonder about the adequacy of a Christian theology that is still used to justify sex discrimination and oppression. What are we to make of religious tradition in which God is imaged as a male, the ancient system in which "he" reveals himself is patriarchal, the supreme revelation of

his will in the incarnation is through a "son," and all of the early church's leading authorities are male? Can we be comfortable with a theology which asserts that the ultimate reality is essentially masculine, so much so that, as one woman observed, "I'm made in the image of God but a little less so than you are, Jim Londis. At best, I'm an afterthought."

I am left asking: "When we call God 'father,' is it a metaphor, or is it literally true? Is God male? Is 'maleness' divine in a way 'femaleness' is not?"

There is indeed something awry at the core of male-female relationships—the will of God for women is being frustrated by men unwilling to relinquish their power over women.

At Columbia Union College I teach a course in the philosophy of religion. Whenever we come to the point of discussing the nature of God, my students usually defend the following propositions:

- (1) God has a body just like ours;
- (2) God's body resembles the male;
- (3) I can relate to God only if he has a body of some kind.

They are too sophisticated to believe that God has internal organs like ours or has the limitations of a human brain. But they do insist on a human "form" or "appearance" being a part of God's reality. They reason: "If we are made in his image, he has to look like we do."

When I patiently point out that there is no evidence that the image of God refers to more than our "personhood"—to our capacity to love and decide—and that insisting God has a body somehow imprisons him in the material objects he created, their shock is seismic. They seem to have never been asked to take seriously Jesus' statement that "God is a spirit . . ." who transcends the limitations of corporeality. that his "appearance" is just that—an appearance.²

I do not deny that, in an effort to help finite creatures respond to the deity in a mode they understand, God appears in bodily form. But that is quite different from claiming God *is* a body. God adopts a human appearance to reassure us and facilitate our relationship to him. Moreover, an undue emphasis on God's body may lead us to a *reductio ad absurdum*, such as debating the color of God's body. Is it white, as Archie Bunker assumed? Or is it black, as his neighbor Jefferson assumed? Or is God in one sense every color and in the ultimate sense beyond color?

If a body is not essential to God's deity, then maleness cannot be essential either. Of course, one does feel the closeness and warmth of God via human images. When they are absent, God seems remote and unapproachable, so much so that prayer and worship become more difficult. That is why we must continue to think about God in human images.

The question is, how much do we want to restrict those images? If God is essentially personal, then any personal images help us understand his relationship to us. This is why the masculine God of the Bible is also portrayed in feminine imagery. God is pictured as carrying Israel in the womb, as birthing and suckling his people, as comforting them as a mother comforts her child, and as wanting to "gather them as a hen gathers her chicks. . . ." Such feminine images enhance and complement the masculine ones, making God's compassion richer, more profound, and more experientially powerful for all of us. We all have mothers and all understand, to some extent, the unique bodily functions of females. Consequently, men are not the sex opposite to women but complementary to them, both sexes unified by their shared humanity. This unity of male and female suggests that:

God is neither male nor female, nor a combination of the two. And yet, detecting divine transcendence in human reality requires human clues. Unique among them . . . is sexuality. God creates, in the

image of God, male and female. To describe male and female, then, is to perceive the image of God; to perceive the image of God is to glimpse the transcendence of God.³

Relating to God as a person with an appearance like our own may be the only way we can have the experiential intimacy with deity we require. But let us not additionally, and therefore wrongly, suppose that God's bodily form in such appearances is identical to his substance. As Phyllis Trible so aptly put it: "A metaphor is like a finger pointing to the moon;" however, "the moon . . . can be seen but not possessed."⁴ The moment we equate our finger with the moon, as it were, we are guilty of idolatry. If God's appearance is believed to be more than a pointer, we do not worship God in his transcendence but worship our limited images or metaphors of him. To avoid falling into this trap, we must be willing to enrich the typical masculine language we use about God. Feminine imagery is one way to accomplish that. If we refuse to do so, we divinize maleness and commit idolatry.

Without this issue of male-as-metaphor clearly in mind, we will assume that the patriarchal system of the Old Testament does indeed reflect the nature and will of God. Understanding the metaphorical nature of theological assertions allows us to deal with biblical patriarchy more adequately.

One cannot deny that there is a strong bias toward God as male and the male as priest/leader in the Middle Eastern cultures of the biblical writers, a bias reflected in the Bible. If the feminine imagery and experience that does appear in Scripture is overlooked, the Bible will be used to justify male superiority in the contemporary church.

When we look at the Bible from a woman's perspective, we recognize that the biblical translators who worked with the Hebrew and Greek texts sometimes betray a male orientation. They seem to assume that men developed all the missionary initia-

tives in the early church and always exercised central leadership. Therefore, texts that do not fit this model are quickly translated/interpreted to stress male authority. Romans 16:1-3 is an example. In the text, Phoebe is described as a *diakonos*. When the Greek text applies this term to men it is rendered "deacon" in English. But when Phoebe is referred to, the same Greek word *diakonos* is translated "servant" or "helper." This is obviously not a consistent way to render the Greek term: deacon suggests leadership, while the other terms do not. It is speculated that the translators presuppose

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that women in the early church are *helping* men, not leading in their own right.⁵

Looking at the Bible through feminine eyes, we also notice that while there are glimpses of women in extraordinary roles in the book of Acts—supporting the missionary movement with money and the use of their homes as meeting places—there are no narratives featuring women as they do men. Luke, the writer of Acts, refers to prophetesses in the early church, and Paul takes it for granted that women are speaking in public worship (I Cor. 11), but these references to women are in stark contrast to the stories about men. Where gripping details are given about the men, the women are all but ignored. (The outstanding exception to this pattern in the New Testament is the gospel of John which is full of stories about women.) This suggests that even though it is divine revelation, when the Bible is written by men steeped in a patriarchal culture its silences must be analyzed very carefully. Women may have exercised leadership, but men neglected to report it as fully as they might have.

Scholars also wonder about a peculiar debate in the early Christian community over whether Peter or Mary was the first witness to Christ's resurrection. Some extracanonical documents even record an intense competition between these two disciples. Such a tradition of a struggle between Mary and Peter over priority of witness to the resurrection may have mirrored the church's struggle over the leadership role of women. Otherwise, it is argued, discussion over who was the first witness to the risen Christ would be pointless.

Silence does not have only negative connotations, however; it can be positive. A case in point might be the fact that not one story or statement attributed to Jesus can be found in which he demands women either adapt to or submit to patriarchy. On the contrary, Jesus created a unique community in Palestine, one that was egalitarian in every respect. One's economic class, moral behavior, education, strict adherence to religious practice, or gender did not merit special treatment of any kind. His open, affirming lifestyle, in which acceptance was offered especially to the outcast, was a powerful protest to the dominant culture. Even with his inner 12 being all male, from all we know Christ included women the

same way he included men. Only as the Christian movement became institutionalized in the hierarchical patterns of the first few centuries were women gradually excluded from leadership.

Nevertheless, some point out, even if Jesus was silent about patriarchy, Paul certainly was not. He clearly teaches the subordination of women to men. However, before we jump to that conclusion, we ought to make sure we place all relevant passages in their historical context. What appears to be a text justifying women's subordination may turn out to be a discussion about an altogether different matter.⁶ We must also distinguish between those texts that address specific cases in the church ("casuistic" counsel), and those articulating a general principle ("apodictic" counsel).

Feminist theologians insist that if we did not distinguish between cases and principles, we would still be justifying polygamy and slavery, both of which are tacitly supported in Scripture. But we recognize that while God may have tolerated such conditions for a time, they fell far short of his ideal. When the church finally perceived the impossible tension between God's will and the practice of the believers, Christians had to take a decided stand against slavery.

A Suggested Bibliography on Women and Religion

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The same situation exists with respect to the role of women in the church. When God has called people to serve his church in the prophetic ministry, he has made no distinctions based on gender. His promise in Joel 2 is that the spirit will be poured out on "sons and daughters," "young men and young women." If God is "no respecter of persons" when he chooses prophets, why does the church assume it must respect gender differences when it chooses preachers? To the extent that the church prevents women from exercising full leadership in the ministry, to that extent the church turns its back on the ideal to which God summons it.

When we move from the specifically biblical to the more general theological issues, feminists believe that the principle of the full humanity of women is the *sine qua non* of God's will.⁷ Up until now, this full humanity has been granted only to men. What it will mean for women to have it is not fully known, for it has never existed in history. When women claim this principle for themselves, their experience changes profoundly; since our experience is an important source for theological reflection, feminist theologies will also be somewhat different from the male-oriented theologies of the past.

Recent publications suggest some of these new directions feminist thought is going. To the extent that hierarchy creates privileged classes, feminist thought is anti-hierarchical. It argues for mutuality and equality, for a relational structure in human existence that appropriates the principles within the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. Once the supreme authority of the prophetic message of freedom for the oppressed is acknowledged, patriarchy can "no longer be maintained as authoritative."⁸ When that happens, anthropology, Christology, eschatology, and virtually all the other doctrines must be re-examined to see how female

experience illuminates their meaning for us. Male and female together, in full humanity, provide the balance needed for theological insight. A feminine theology that ignored the male dimension would be just as twisted as the one we have known. For the truth to be served, both must be affirmed.

To feminists, the thrust of the biblical message is clear: regardless of the reasons for their oppression, God vindicates the poor and oppressed. The Bible points to a new heaven and a new earth in which justice and righteousness flow like a mighty river. Such an eschatological vision bespeaks judgment on the present order of things and summons the church to be the people of God, those who already live under his rule.

Were we now to embrace this vision with all our beings, there would be few, if any, Connies who blame themselves for being raped, or black-and-blue wives who excuse their husbands' violence, or marriages torn apart because they were founded on the principle of male supremacy. Many members in the Potomac Conference watched this vision break into the present last April when several women stood in baptistries to utter the baptismal formula over a number of people they had prepared for baptism. Spines literally tingled from the power of that symbolic act. Men groped for handkerchiefs, and women wiped their eyes. One woman told me that her tearful reaction surprised her, for she would never have predicted the inner stirrings that baptism created. Young girls radiated affirmation and joy, while old men embraced these women pastors with tenderness.

At those baptisms, the sense that the glory of God's coming kingdom had shone on our worship in the present created a moment of transcendent meaning. We tasted the sweetness of Paul's triumphant words: "In Christ there is neither Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27,28).

 NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Rosemary Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), pp. 261-263.

2. Some theologians like Paul Tillich would argue that strictly speaking even the concept of "person" is a metaphor. God as the ultimate ground of reality is beyond the personal. See his *Systematic Theology I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 223, 233-45, for a discussion of his views. It should also be noted, however, that other scholars like E. LaB. Cherbonnier insist that person is the highest conceivable category that can be applied to God. It is not anthropomorphic to use personalistic language about God, for our concept of what person means comes from our understanding of God and our realization that we are made in his image. See his "The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism," *The Harvard Theological Review*, July 1962, pp. 187-206.

3. Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 21. Quoted in Sallie McFague's *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 169.

4. *Ibid.*

5. For a thorough discussion of the biblical materials, see Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co., 1983); Krister Stendahl's *The Bible and the Role of Women* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966); Letty Russell's *The Liberating Word: A Guide to Non-Sexist Interpretation of The Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976); and Paul K. Jewett's *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975).

6. An example of this point is Jerome Murphy O'Connor's "Sex and Logic in I Corinthians 11:2-16," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4, October 1980, pp. 482-500. O'Connor argues that Paul's concern in this passage is that men and women be distinguishable from each other in their hairstyles. The apostle is not dealing with the issue of hierarchical structures in church leadership.

7. See Reuther, pp. 93-115.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 25.