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Female Symbols for God

The Apophatic Tradition and Social Justice

Abstract

After analyzing deleterious effects of using exclusively masculine symbols of God, this essay argues that using female symbols of God, not exclusively but in combination with male, animal, and cosmic images, is both legitimate and necessary for the healthy life of the church. Such language has profound implications for thought about the divine personality, and actions in the world. It also has critical consequences for practice regarding the human dignity of women as fully equal to men. Using the tradition of Holy Wisdom, the article works out Trinitarian language in a female key. Addressing the God beyond all names in female terms decisively colors the polity and religious stance of the church as a community that influences society.

Keywords

Female images of God, Father: critique, Mystery, women's human dignity, oppression, shattering the idol, compassion, Trinitarian language, Sophia.

Introduction

I would like to extend many warm thanks to Father Stefan Buchiu, Dean of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology at the University of Bucharest, for the invitation to participate in this conference, which is being held with the support and blessing of His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Roman Orthodox Church. It is a distinct privilege for me to be included in this ecumenical gathering of so

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many contributing theologians. The subject of my lecture, "Female Symbols for God" may at first glance seem not to fit with the theme of this symposium, "God the Father and the Life of the Holy Trinity." But I have been asked to speak on this subject, I think, in order to introduce a wider context that will honor the truth of God more fully by drawing on the apophatic tradition, and will promote human well-being by showing the connection of the church's God-language with the struggle for justice for women. In this context, the value of this symposium's theme may find its assured place.

During the last decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the new sound of educated women's voices has been heard in the field of theology. Active in ministry, theologically trained, deeply committed to the church, Christian women of different racial and cultural identities around the world are engaging in the age-old task of "faith seeking understanding."[1] One of the major areas where women have labored focuses on the Holy Mystery who is the one creative Source, redeeming Savior, and vivifying Spirit that embraces the world, whom people call "G-O-D."

The importance of this work can hardly be overestimated. The way a group names its God has critical consequences, for the symbol of the divine organizes every other aspect of a religious system. The way a faith community speaks about God indicates what it considers the greatest good, the profoundest truth, the most appealing beauty. In turn, the image of God shapes a community's corporate identity and behavior as well as the individual behavior of its members. A religion like the Aztec way, for example, that depicts God like a warrior with his tongue like a sharp knife dripping blood, would promote human sacrifice and aggressive group behavior among its adherents. By contrast, a religion that preaches a God who lovingly forgives offenses would turn believers toward reconciliation and care for their neighbor, even enemies. *The symbol of God functions*. Beyond verbal or visual references, it focuses a whole complex of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, emotions, and associations, very deep and tenacious. It is never neutral in its effects, but expresses and molds a community's bedrock convictions and actions.

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1 For surveys of feminist theology on all continents see Ursula King (ed.), *Feminist Theology from the Third World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1994); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gender and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); and Susan Frank Parsons (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Here is where theology done by women has discovered a dangerous problem in the Christian tradition. Despite the apophatic wisdom that "God dwells in light inaccessible whom no one has seen or can see" (1Tim 6:16), the standard way of speaking in the church models God almost exclusively on the male human being. And not just any men. It is wealthy, powerful men of the upper class and privileged race who serve as the chief model for the divine as is evident in the most commonly used names: King, Lord, Father. Women's scholarship on this subject has made it piercingly clear that naming God almost exclusively in the image of a powerful ruling man has at least three pernicious effects. 1) By literalizing this image, it reduces the living God to something much less, indeed, to an idol. 2) It legitimates structures of male authority in civil and ecclesial communities: in the name of the Father God who rules over all, men have the duty to command and control, on earth as it is in heaven. 3) It robs women of their dignity by distancing their human nature made in the image and likeness of God from their own concrete, bodily identity.

Is this state of affairs necessary? Again, women's scholarship has uncovered a wealth of female images of the divine, from the biblical portrayal of God in maternal images: pregnant, crying out in labor, nursing, carrying on her shoulders, comforting, never abandoning; to the great figure of Holy Wisdom (*Sophia*), the intensely female personification of Israel's God's who leads the people across the Red Sea, and against whom evil does not prevail; from the great Spirit *ruah*, to Jesus' image of God the Redeemer as a woman looking for her lost coin, to glimpses of God as midwife, teacher, female beloved, hostess, justly angry prophet, sister, female friend, in a word: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, the Holy One of Blessing, Blessed be She.

My thesis in this lecture is that using female symbols of God, not exclusively but in combination with male, animal, and cosmic images, is both legitimate and necessary for the healthy life of the church. Such language has profound implications for how we think about and relate to the divine: God's nature, personality, and actions in the world. It also has critical consequences for the liberation of women as fully equal to men in human and religious dignity. In both of these ways, female speech about God decisively colors the polity and religious stance of the church as a community that influences society. Let us explore these ramifications at greater length, speaking first about God and then about justice. [2]

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[2] For extended discussion of what follows, see book *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992; tenth anniversary edition with new Preface, 2002). Translations include - German: *Ich Bin Die Ich Bin: Wenn Frauen Gott Sagen*, (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1994); Portuguese: *Aquela que E,': O*

Implications for the truth of God

The truth of the Holy Triune God has been protected throughout the Christian tradition by three ground-rules that govern all speech about the divine. The first and most basic is this: the reality of God is a mystery beyond all imagining. God is literally incomprehensible. The history of theology is replete with this truth: recall Augustine's insight that if we have understood, then what we have understood is not God; Anselm's argument that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived; Hildegard's vision of God's glory as Living Light that blinded her sight; Aquinas' working rule that we can know that God is and what God is not, but not what God is; Luther's stress on the hiddenness of God's glory in the suffering of the cross; Simone Weil's conviction that there is nothing that resembles what she can conceive of when she says the word God.[3] Interpreting this ground rule in the framework of transcendental thought, Karl Rahner argues that the incomprehensibility of God belongs not at the margins or the end of the road in theology but at its very heart, insofar as God's inexhaustibility is the very condition for the possibility of the human spirit's self-transcendence in knowledge and love.[4] Hans Urs von Balthasar argues that even divine revelation does not remove this mystery; rather, it deepens the mystery by showing how profoundly God loves, to be willing even to suffer for us. Indeed, revelation does not signify an 'enlightenment', writes Walter Kasper, such as would enable human beings to penetrate divine mystery. Rather, it is the revelation precisely of mystery even with regard to the Trinity: "The trinitarian profession of faith is therefore not only the summation of the revelation of the mystery

Misterio de Deus no Trabalho Teologico Feminino (Petropolis, Brazil: Vozes, 1995); Italian: *Colei che é: Il mistero di Deo nel discorso teologico femminista* (Brescia: Quiriniana, 1999); French: *Dieu au-delà du masculin et du féminin: Celui / Celle qui est* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1999); Montreal: Paulines éditions, 1999; Korean: English equivalent: The Hundred-and-first Name of God (Seoul: Pauline Press, 2000); Spanish: *La Que Es: El misterio de Dios en el discurso teológico feminista* (Barcelona: Herder, 2002).

3 Augustine, *Sermon* 52. c. 6 (*PL* 38, 360), in: John Rotelle (ed.), *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Part III: *Sermons*, trans. and notes by Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1995); Anselm, *Proslogium*, in *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S.N. Deane (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1974): chap. 2-3, P. 7-9; Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist, 1990): Book I, Vision One, P. 67-69; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: Benziger, 1957): Part I, q.3, preface, P. 14; Luther, „The Heidelberg Disputation", in: James Atkinson (trans. & ed.), *Luther: Early Theological Works*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962): thesis 19 and 20, P. 290-91.; Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), P. 32.

4 Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), P. 44-89.

of God; it is also the concrete exposition of the hiddenness of God, which is the origin, goal and essential content of all revelation."[5]

It is a matter of the livingness of God.

Consequently, there is a second ground rule: no expression for God can be taken literally. Not one. All human words about the divine proceed by way of indirection. Catholic theology has traditionally explained this with the theory of analogy. Based on the doctrine of creation, analogy holds that all creatures participate in some way in the overflowing goodness, truth, and beauty of the One who made them. Therefore, something of the creature's excellence can direct us back to God. In the process, however, as the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) taught, whatever similarity we might find between creatures and God, the dissimilarity is "always ever greater." Analogy operates with this realization, putting words about God through a threefold wringer: it affirms, negates, and then negates the negation itself, thus reaffirming something of God in a supereminent way beyond the concept. When we attribute goodness to God, the theological meaning is this: God is good; but God is not good the way creatures are good; but God is good in a supereminent way as Source of all that is good. At this point our concept of goodness cracks open. We literally do not understand what we are saying. Human comprehension of the meaning of "good" is lost, for we have no direct earthly experience of anything that is the Source of all goodness. Yet the very saying of it ushers our spirit toward the presence of the living God who transcends both assertion and negation in what mystics refer to as "brilliant darkness." We are left on our knees in adoration.

Protestant theology tends to use metaphor with its "is/is not" tension to explain the indirect character of God-language. "A mighty fortress is our God": the play of metaphor starts with a literal base, then extends its literal meaning until it is logically quite absurd but nonetheless leads to a kind of insight. It is true without being literally a fact. Whatever theory is used, whether analogy, metaphor, symbol, or some combination thereof, the wisdom of this second ground rule is that we are always naming *toward* God, using fragments experienced in the world to point to the infinite mystery who dwells within and embraces the world but always exceeds our grasp.

"From this," Thomas Aquinas argues, articulating the third ground rule, "we see the necessity of giving to God many names."[6] If human beings were capable of expressing divine fullness in one straight-as-an-arrow

5 Walter Kasper, The God of Jesus Christ (New York: Crossroad, 1984), P. 128.

6 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton Pegis (Garden City, new York: Doubleday, 1955): Book I, 31:4, p. 143.

name, the multiplication of names in all the world's religions would make no sense. But there is no one such name. Rather, in jubilation and praise, lamentation and mourning, thanksgiving and petition, crying out and the final falling into silence, we name God with a symphony of phrases.

The Bible provides a major example. In this sacred book there is a polyphony of forms of discourse - narrative, wisdom writings, prophecy, command, hymns, laments, parables, poetry - each reflecting different aspects of relationship to holy mystery. "The referent 'God' is intended by the convergence of all these partial discourses," writes philosopher Paul Ricoeur, yet God is still a reality which eludes them all.[7] In the matrix of these discourses an abundance of images comes into play. In addition to terms taken from personal relationships such as father, mother, husband, female beloved, companion and friend, and images taken from political life such as advocate, liberator, king, warrior and judge, scripture pictures God on the model of a wide array of human crafts and professions: dairymaid, shepherd, farmer, laundress, construction worker, potter, fisherman, midwife, merchant, physician, bakerwoman, teacher, writer, artist, nurse, metal worker, homemaker. Despite the predominance of imagery taken from the experience of men, feminist exegesis brings to light the evocative vision of God as a female figure of power and might in the Sophia texts, as well as more maternal images. Pointers to the divine are drawn from the animal kingdom, with God depicted as roaring lion, hovering mother bird, angry mother bear, and protective mother hen, and from cosmic reality such as light, cloud, rock, fire, refreshing water and life itself.

Post-biblical Jewish usage continued to be fertile ground for the many names of God, as can be seen in the over ninety names used in the Mishnah.[8] Among them, in addition to the most popular terms Creator and Father (of mercy, of the whole world, in heaven), are: the Living God, Friend of the World, Mighty One, Searcher of Hearts, the One who knows the thoughts of all, Lord of Consolations, Height of the World, Eye of the World, Life of the World, Beloved, the One who dwells in hidden places, the Heart of Israel, the One who understands, the One who spoke and the world was, Justice of the World, Home of the World, Rock of the World, the Holy One, Holy Spirit, the One who hears, Peace of the World, Strong One, Merciful One.

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7 Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34 (1978-79), P. 222.

8 A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God* (New York: KTAV Pub., 1968; originally 1927), P. 17-147. A similar listing of Christian names of God during the same period is compiled by Hans-Werner Bartsch, "L'emploi du nom de Dieu dans le Christianisme primitif," in Enrico Castelli, ed., *L'analyse du langage the,'ologique: le nom de Dieu* (Paris: Aubier, 1969), P. 185-200.

Islamic custom illustrates the wisdom that there are many names for the Holy Mystery with its litany of praises of Allah. There are one hundred names in all - Praised be Allah the Almighty, the Compassionate, the Holy, the Peaceful, the Shelterer of orphans, etc; but only ninety-nine names are actually said. The last one is honored in silence - and it is the truest of all. As folklore would have it, only the camel knows.[9]

Even in the face of all this richness, however, what Aquinas calls the "poverty of our vocabulary"[10] perdures. Taking all the names together will not deliver an exhaustive understanding. To borrow a metaphor from Henri de Lubac, persons who seek to know God by compiling the names of God do not resemble misers amassing a heap of gold, a summa of truths, which can go on increasing until a rare purchase can be made. Rather, such persons are better compared to swimmers who can only keep afloat by moving, by cleaving a new wave at each stroke. They are forever brushing aside the representations which are continually reforming, knowing full well that these support them, but that if they were to rest for a single moment they would sink.[11] "*Si comprehendis, non est Deus* - If you have understood, it is not God."[12]

These three principles: the incomprehensibility of God, the non-literal nature of religious language, and the need for many divine names, are affirmed throughout Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition, and about them there is little dispute. Together they exercise a strongly critical function when brought face to face with standard ecclesial language. For these rules must be applied to male images and concepts of the Triune God no less than to other aspects of divine predication. The designation 'he' and the name 'Father' are subject to all the limitations found in any word referring to God, and in the end do not really tell us anything essential about the divine. God is not literally a father; God is not literally a person, or three persons; even the number three cannot be interpreted in a literal numerical sense. Without this awareness, standard ecclesial use produces a literal-mindedness about Father-Son language. The result is a graven image. On one occasion the feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether was speaking on this point when a member of the audience stood to argue, with great exasperation, "God is not male. He is Spirit." Ruether's response pointed out that if that were really the case, why all the fuss when the pronoun "She" is used of God? The conflicts that break out over

9 E. von Ivanka, "Le proble,`me des 'noms de Dieu' et de l'ineffabilite,' divine selon le pseudo-Denys l'are,'opagite," in Castelli, ed., *L'analyse*, P. 201-205.
10 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.37, a.1, P. 188-190.
11 Henri De Lubac, *Discovery of God* (New York: P.J. Kenedy, 1960), P. 120-21.
12 Augustine, *Sermon* 52, c.6 (*PL* 38, 360), in: John Rotelle (ed.), *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Part III: *Sermons*.

female naming indicate that, however subliminally, maleness *is* intended when we say God. The ineffable mystery of the infinitely loving Triune God has been reduced to the fantasy of a male ruler.[13]

Prophets have long insisted on the need to break down false idols and escape out of their embrace toward the living God. Using the language of patriarchy, C. S. Lewis grasps this with telling clarity:

My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? ... And most are offended by the iconoclasm; and blessed are those who are not.[14]

What needs to be shattered, according to feminist theological critique, is the stranglehold on religious language of God-He. Toward that goal, naming God in female form has profound theological significance. Put bluntly, it smashes the idol. By relativizing masculine imagery, it breaks the stranglehold of our too-narrow discourse. This is not to say that male images cannot be used to name God. Men too are decent creatures, made in the image of God, sinful yet redeemed, and metaphors taken from their experience may be used. Indeed, a good father is a wonderful blessing. But seeking the female face of God releases divine mystery from its age-old patriarchal cage so that God can be truly God. This is an act critical for the truth of God in faith and theology.

But that is not all. Given the destructive power of evil in the world, both the mystery of God's truth and human flourishing are terrifyingly at risk in history. The truth about God is twisted to justify human oppression, and companion creatures are demeaned in the name of a distorted view of divine will. "By deforming God we protect our own egotism," Uruguayan theologian Juan Luis Segundo contends with startling insight. "Our falsified and inauthentic ways of dealing with our fellow human beings are allied to our falsification of the idea of God. Our unjust society and our perverted idea of God are in close and terrible alliance."[15] The logic of that alliance leads to the realization that in addition to liberating the truth of God, naming God with female metaphors is also powerfully liberating for women created in Her image.

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13 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), P. 67.
14 C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber, 1966), P. 52.
15 Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974), P. 8.

Implications for the dignity of women

An ambiguity about women's true humanity bedevils the Christian traditions. On the one hand, the church teaches that women are created in the image of God, redeemed by Jesus Christ, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, called to responsibility for their actions in this world, and destined for eternal joy in heaven. But on the other hand, precisely because of women's sexual embodiment, theology has diminished the strength of each of these markers, seeing women in the image of God only when taken together with man who is her head (Augustine), or as a defective, misbegotten male (Aquinas), or even like Eve, a dangerous temptress to men's virtue (Tertullian), to name a few.[16] Behind these traditional, distorted but highly influential male definitions of women is classical Hellenistic dualism which separates reality into spirit and matter, identifying men with spirit (i.e. light, soul, reason, act - what is eternal and divine), while identifying women with matter (i.e. darkness, body, emotions, passivity - what is changeable, uncontrollable, and passing away toward death). By this logic women exist with an inferiority for which there is no remedy.

As with any system of oppression, once this theory and its structures get put in place, it begins to be taken for granted. Over time women internalize the images that the male-dominated system feeds them, and begin to think of themselves as less than worthy. As a powerful element in this system, the exclusively male image of God promotes this perception. Carol Christ has analyzed this in particularly acute fashion:

Religious symbol systems focused around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent. This message need never be explicitly stated for its effect to be felt. A woman completely ignorant of the myths of female evil in biblical religion nonetheless acknowledges the anomaly of female power when she prays exclusively to a male god. She may see herself as like God (created in the image of God) only by denying her own sexual identity and affirming God's transcendence of sexual identity. But she can never have the experience that is freely available to every man and boy in her culture, of having her full sexual identity affirmed as being in the image and likeness of God. ... her "mood" is one of trust in male power

[16] Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. and notes by Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, New York: New City Press, 1991): Book 12, chap. 3, par. 10, p. 328; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.92, a.1, P. 466-467; Tertullian, *On the Dress of Women* 1.1 (CSEL 70.59), cited in: Elizabeth Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1983): P. 39.

as salvific and distrust of female power in herself and other women as inferior and dangerous.[17]

If there is an absolute heavenly father, then social arrangements on earth must pivot around hierarchical rulers who of necessity must be male in order to represent him and rule in his name. This men do to the exclusion of women by a certain right, thanks to their greater similarity to the source of all being. Language about the father in heaven justifies an earthly order in which the male religious leader rules over his flock, the civil ruler has domination over his subjects, the husband exercises headship over his wife. In Mary Daly's succinct phrase: "if God is male, then the male is God."[18]

The consequences are evident in most of the Christian churches to this day. Women have traditionally been marginalized, largely without formal voice or vote, excluded from the official shaping of doctrinal or ethical teaching, prevented from participating in governance, barred from leadership in ritual, banned from preaching the word of God, fit mainly for auxiliary service. This subordinate position in the churches has correlated with rather than challenged the practices of civil society, with ramifications for women's well-being the world over. Consider statistics reported by the United Nations at the millennium. While forming one-half of the world's population, women do two-thirds of the world's work, receive one-tenth of the world's salary, own one-onehundredth of the world's land, form two-thirds of illiterate adults, and together with their starving children comprise three-fourths of the world's starving people.[19] To make a dark picture even bleaker, women are bodily abused, sexually exploited, raped, trafficked, battered, and murdered by men to a degree that is not mutual. The fact that the UN millennium goals specifically single out women's education, health care, and economic opportunity, indicates how overlooked these are on a global scale.

As the women's movement has developed in the religions, something akin to a spiritual uprising is taking place. Women are experiencing themselves as beloved of God. They are being converted from trivializing themselves to honoring themselves as genuinely theomorphic. The shock of discovering the misogyny in the tradition accompanied by the surge of

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17 Carol Christ, in *Womanspirit Rising*, Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), P. 275.

18 Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (NY: Harper & Row, 1975), P. 38; see her sustained analysis in *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

19 *Report of the United Nations on the Status of Women* (New York: United Nations, 2000); see also *The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (New York: United Nations, 1996).

self-affirmation against it opens the door to new forms of spirituality. The artist says it best. In a dramatic play about the metaphysical dilemma of being black, being female, and being alive, author Ntozake Shange has a surviving character rise from despair to cry out, "I found god in myself and I loved her, I loved her fiercely."[20] It is this finding and fierce loving of the female self in relation to God and God in relation to self that is a major root of women's search for a fuller life. As part of this religious and political movement, numerous women are questing for new religious language, new readings of the classic tradition, and new forms of ritual that bless rather than demean the reality of being female. Attentive to their own experiences of suffering and agency, they claim full participation in the truths of faith. In this context, aware that God created them in the divine image and likeness, they seek to return the favor and speak about Holy Mystery in female terms.

One example: biblical scholars today point out that the Hebrew word for God's mercy, *rachamim,* comes from the root word for women's uterus, *rechem*, so that when scripture calls upon God to have mercy, it is actually asking God to forgive us with the kind of love a mother has for the child of her womb. As Isaiah wrote:

> Can a woman forget her sucking child,
>
> that she should have no compassion on the child of her womb?
>
> Yet even if these may forget, I will not forget you. (Isa 49:15)

In biblical scholar Phyllis Trible's memorable analysis, what we witness here is the "journey of a metaphor from the wombs of women to the compassion of God."[21] What kind of church life would develop if this were made an explicit part of our understanding of divine mercy rather than being tucked implicitly in the text?

Naming toward God in female phrases is not a panacea in and of itself. But in the context of the social movement for women's equality and human dignity which now reaches global proportions, this language has a unique potential for affecting change at a deep and lasting level. *The symbol of God functions*. Female images of God function to affirm the excellence of being a woman bodily, psychologically, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. Reorienting the imagination at a basic level, this usage allows the church to discover the sacred in places where the community had long stopped looking to find it - namely, in what is associated with women. The net effect is change, or in religious terms conversion. The changed discourse

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[20] Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), P. 63.

[21] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), P. 31-59.

points to new ways of living together with each other and the earth, which flows into the struggle for social justice for all women and their girl children, now seen to be of inestimable worth.

It is important to flag a danger to this enterprise of seeking the female face of God. This danger arises when theology, drawing on a dualistic anthropology, applies the category of the "feminine" in opposition to the "masculine." Adapted from classical philosophy sometimes buttressed by Jungian psychology, this maneuver assigns pre-set characteristics to men and women on the basis of their sex and then extrapolates to claim that different social roles are necessary. Masculine nature is rational, aggressive, equipped for action in the public realm, while feminine nature, emotional, gentle, and oriented to love and nurturing, is fit for the private domain of childbearing and care of the vulnerable. The presence of this gender essentialism is signaled when theologians talk about God having feminine 'traits' or 'aspects,' or a feminine 'dimension' or 'side.' This attributes women's presumed nurturing qualities to the divine. But being loving and compassionate is insufficient for governance of the world, and so these traits are complemented by the so-called masculine traits of power, justice-making, and headship. At the end of the day, God is still envisioned in the image of the ruling man, only now possessing a milder, sweeter side that offsets the harshness of the purely masculine model. Women's reality is thereby incorporated in a diminished way into a symbol of the divine that remains predominantly male. What we do not enjoy is an icon of God in all divine fullness and strength in female form.

What is the practical effect in the human community? Men created in the image of this God benefit by developing feminine, nurturing qualities in themselves. However, women find no equivalent spur to develop in themselves the presumably masculine qualities of rationality or the ability to act. *The symbol of God functions*. Actual women are then seen as capable of representing only the *feminine* qualities of what is still the male-centered symbol of God, the fullness of which can only be represented by a man. In this case, since women by nature are forbidden the function of headship, the "feminine" face of God becomes the ultimate justification for women's subordination.

By what right are compassionate love and nurturing designated primarily feminine characteristics, rather than *human* ones? Why are strength, sovereignty and rationality mainly properties of the male person, rather than of *human* persons including women? The stereotypical "feminine" shrinks the vast diversity of women's gifts into a narrow set of characteristics. In contrast to this dualistic anthropology, an egalitarian anthropology of partnership grants women and men their own individual diversity, seeing human gifts not restricted by gender. Men can be

sensitive and nurture. Women can be smart and lead. The human race exists in a plurality of configurations. In this framework, female metaphors can point toward the whole of divine mystery in as adequate and inadequate a way as male metaphors do. Women are capable *as women* of pointing to the whole of the mystery of God, not merely an aspect or dimension. We reflect God not only as nurturing, although certainly that, but as powerful, intelligent, taking initiative, creating-redeeming-saving, angry against injustice, and struggling with and victorious over the powers of this world. The still-developing historical reality of women is source for female icons of the living God in all Her fullness and strength. And women are blessed in the naming.

Trinity

Once our knowledge has become pervaded with an apophatic sense of the ineffability of the Holy Mystery; when we have grown accustomed in prayer and preaching to the symphony of divine images found in scripture; when we have gained awareness of the social and political ramifications of our symbols of God: then belief in the Trinity can be uttered with profoundly positive effect. For it is nothing less than the Christian code for proclaiming that "God is Love" (1 John 4:16).

From the perspective of the economy of salvation, the point of this symbol is to assert that the God known in Jesus Christ through the Spirit is not just any God, a generic God, a static being dreamed up by the imagination, but a specifically universal plenitude of dynamic, self-giving love. Trinity points to the fullness of the saving divine mystery who creates, redeems, and empowers the whole cosmos. It bespeaks divine life structured in love so profound that it is "ecstatic," directed outward toward the world of sin and suffering to bless and heal. The whole point of this history of God with the world is to bring the world back into the life of divine communion. Trinity bespeaks the God who is with us and for us through Jesus Christ and the Spirit.

Moving from this faith experience to the incomprehensible bright darkness of the immanent divine life, theology dares to affirm that this threefold language points in an allusive way to the heart of God as a communion of mutually related persons. The true God exists as the loving communion of Father, Son, and Spirit. In a new development that departs from spiritual contemplation of this mystery in itself, numerous western theologians have noted how this triune symbol provides a liberating corrective to imperial political systems on earth. Jürgen Moltmann develops this thesis with particular reference to patriarchy. The solitary, ruling male God envisioned as a single, absolute subject and named father

can hardly help but have a dominating relationship to the world. This in turn justifies the social and political structures of patriarchy with the solitary human ruler at the head of the pyramid of power. Conversely, the triune God who exists essentially in mutual inner relationships provides a different model for human interaction, pointing to a community without supremacy or subjection where differences flourish in the matrix of a relationship of equals. The triune idea of God points to a community of brothers and sisters in which all are one in shared responsibility without subordination or privilege.[22] This analysis appreciates in a keen way the radical equality of mutual relations in the Trinity, which can function as an inspiration and critique for society and the church.

By contrast, some theologians draw on the Father's pre-eminence in the Trinity to defend traditional relationships between men and women. The German theologian Werner Neuer, for example, writes that just as creation is subordinate to the Creator and is meant to serve God, so the woman is subordinate to the man and is designed to support him. Furthermore, this signifies no inequality, for it follows the pattern set within the Trinity itself. As the Father is the source of the Son, so man is the source of woman. As the Son is obedient to the Father, so woman should be obedient to man. "In the loving submission of the woman to the man is reflected the inner trinitarian glory of the relationship of the Son to the Father. Could anything greater be said about woman?"[23] Of course, much greater things can be said about women, and the doublespeak of subordinate-but-equal is disingenuous. But the hierarchical pattern established by a certain type of trinitarian theology does lend itself to such application. Examples of this reasoning can be found in Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant theologians. It is an ecumenical error.

What kind of relationship does the Trinity model, hierarchical relationships or relationships of equality in mutuality? The answer is crucial if the revelation of God as a triune communion of love is to connect with a desire for a just human community. To my mind, a key criterion for the answer is found in Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God. The God of this reign is precisely not a dominating lord but a God of compassion in solidarity with the slave, the poor, the sinner, the marginalized. As Mary

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22 Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), P. 191-222. See also Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988); and Catherine LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991).

23 Werner Neuer, *Man and Woman in Christian Perspective* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), P. 112, here drawing with approval on the work of Werner Meyer. For further critique, see Catherine LaCugna, in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), P. 83-114.

sings joyfully in her Magnificat: “He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-53), all of this in fulfillment of the ancient promise of mercy. The kingdom of God is not established by dominating relationships but by a new kind of community where the last are first and where those who are first are called to conversion to the “least of these, my brothers and sisters” (Matt 25:40).

To support this interpretation, recall the great Arian controversy of the fourth century. The issue then was whether the Son was subordinate to the Father or not. The faith of the church gathered in council decided: absolutely not. The *homoousios* that the church still confesses in the Nicene Creed is a defense of the equality of persons: “the Son is one-in-being with the Father. The persons remain distinct - we don't get a trinitarian blur - but the Father and the Son and ultimately the Spirit are understood as mutually related in a fundamentally equal way. Among the three there is no subordination; no before and after; no first and last; no dominant and marginalized; no "giving source" and "submissive receiver." Rather, the living God subsists as a communion of equals related in mutuality. As Augustine wrote, “In that highest trinity, one is as much as the three together, nor are two anything more than one. And they are infinite in themselves. So each are in each, and all in each, and each in all, and all in all, and all are one.”[24]

This interpretation is augmented, finally, if we understand that language about the Triune God is not tied exclusively to images of Father, Son, and Spirit. While the weight of usage has been on the side of the male imagery of father and son, all three *hypostases* transcend literal categories of male and female gender. Scattered throughout scripture and tradition, moreover, is an interesting fluidity of usage that offers new possibilities. One such constellation is found in the multiple meanings associated with the biblical figure of Sophia, Holy Wisdom. In various wisdom texts her figure reflects the roles of all three divine 'persons' as she creates, liberates, and graces human beings, pervading the world with healing love. Augustine recognized this point, writing, that while the Word of God is called Wisdom (*Sapientia*) in a special way in the scriptures, the name is not inappropriately used of the whole triune mystery:

Therefore both the Father himself is wisdom, and the Son is called the wisdom of the Father in the same way as he is called the light of the Father; that is, in the same manner that the Son is light from light and yet

[24] Augustine, *The Trinity*, Book 6, chap. 2, par. 12, P. 214.

both are one light, so we are to understand wisdom from wisdom, and yet both one wisdom; and therefore also one essence.[25]

Similarly, "the Holy Spirit also is wisdom proceeding from wisdom"[26], so that in the end he reflects: "I know not why Father and Son and Holy Spirit should not be called love, and all together one love, just as Father and Son and Holy Spirit are called wisdom, and all together not three but one wisdom."[27]

Exploring this insight in terms of the economic Trinity, we can say that God is God as Spirit-Sophia, the mobile, pure, people-loving Spirit who pervades the world with renewing energy and grace. God is God again as Jesus Christ, Sophia incarnate who pitched her tent in the flesh of humanity, revealing through his ministry, death, and resurrection the compassionate, liberating love of Holy Mystery. God is God again as unimaginable abyss of livingness, Holy Wisdom unknown and unknowable, the matrix of all that exists, mother and fashioner of all things, who herself dwells in light inaccessible. "And all together not three but one wisdom."[28]

Moving from speaking about God-with-us to the immanent trinity, we remember that here language is stretched to the breaking point, for God's inner life remains a mystery, strictly speaking, even including the meaning of the word 'inner'. Speaking from a perspective that prizes the equal humanity of women as *imago Dei, imago Christi, imago Spiritui,* we can enlist female metaphors in the task of speaking the unspeakable.

Holy Wisdom does not exist in lifeless self-identity but in three-fold relation. Unoriginate source, unknowable mother of all, she forever comes forth from hiddenness as her distinct self-expressing word. The word is Wisdom in the movement outward from light inaccessible: "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High", Sophia says (Sir 24:3), and this eternal divine movement of self-distinction, when posited externally, grounds creation, becomes personally concrete in incarnation, and takes shape in ongoing fragmentary anticipations of the world's salvation. Simultaneously Holy Wisdom forever unfurls as distinct self-bestowing spirit. The Spirit, holy, intelligent, free-moving, steadfast, is Holy Wisdom in the spiraling movement of liberating love freely and inclusively given. So genuine is the historical gift of herself in the streaming forth of her spirit that in grace we are not dealing with some third thing; rather, the giver herself is the gift.

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25 Ibid., 7: 1, 2.
26 Ibid., 15: 7, 12.
27 Ibid., 15: 17, 28.
28 Ibid., 15: 17, 28.

Through Holy Wisdom's approach in incarnation and grace, we are enabled to speak about the reality of her own inner relatedness in terms of the livingness of unoriginate mother, her beloved child, and the spirit of their mutual love; or the vitality of Wisdom's abyss, her personal word and her energy; or Sophia's eternal communion in personal mystery hidden, uttered and bestowed; or the relations of spirit, wisdom and mother in encircling movement. Each are in each, and all in each, and each in all, and all in all, and all are one. Holy Wisdom's livingness in three distinct movements, shapes, manners of subsistence, *hypostases*, modes of being, 'persons', has as its correlative a benefit and blessing for all who are lost and forsaken. For through the solidarity created by Wisdom incarnate on the cross and the liberating praxis set loose by the Wisdom's spirit, those who suffer are connected with divine life, the ultimate ground of hope. The historical world is interwoven in its time with the healing livingness of Holy Wisdom.

This language too is allusive and indirect. But it draws from the exuberant dignity and life-giving power of women to express divine mystery darkly known through the Christian story of salvation. Such a symbol of the triune God, Holy Wisdom as *imago feminae*, signifies for women the call to grow into the abundance of their human powers, and for the community of women and men together to be creative and loving in ways that address human brokenness, violence, and the destruction of the earth. The triune God exists as a communion of radically equal, mutual relations. And the traces of this are stamped on human beings as images of God. And the traces of this are stamped on all of creation. All are meant to be in communion.

Conclusion

We have been exploring the thesis that naming God in female images has profound implications for the truth about God as well as women's human dignity, and therefore for the self-understanding and polity of the church and wider society. As in any passage through the wilderness, this journey towards more just and liberating God-language is not without its dangers. Some fear that Christians will lose their true heritage, which is intertwined with the holy name of the Trinitarian God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As a theologian I am concerned about this. My own conviction, committed as I am to the Christian faith, holds the Trinitarian formula dear and holds to its necessity especially in the sacrament of baptism. But it is not a literal formula, nor was it ever intended to be the only way that Christians address God. Many revered sources give evidence of the use of female names: scripture with its multitude of images; the example of Jesus who

spoke about God in a plethora startling ways, including most often "the kingdom of God;"[29] the theology of early Christian writers; and the writings of later mystics. There is, too, the religious experience of women today, empowered to seek the face of God in ways that reflect their own God-given human dignity. So long as the female words or images can be connected with the patterns of acting and loving of the God of Israel, revealed in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Mother Jesus (as Julian of Norwich calls Christ), or Jesus-Sophia (as I would have it), and the Spirit, so long as they point us toward the Trinitarian God who creates and redeems the world and whose Spirit fills the whole earth, this danger can be satisfactorily countered.

The living Triune God is profound, incomprehensible Holy Mystery that transcends all language. Far from being silly or faddish, the approach I have argued for here goes forward with the conviction that *only* if God is named in this complete way, *only* if the full reality of historical women of all races and classes as well as men and the cosmos enters into our God symbol, *only* then can the idolatrous fixation on one image of God be broken; only then can women and men be empowered at their deepest core to share life in equal measure; and only then can our religious communities and the societies they influence be transformed toward greater justice. Along the way, a diversity of images for the Triune God weans the Christian imagination from literalism and produces one more fragment of the truth of the mystery of God healing, redeeming, and liberating all human beings and the earth. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor 13:14).

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[29] That Jesus sometimes addressed God with the Aramaic *'abbâ* is historically probable. Whether the formal term 'father' is the best translation is a disputed question. In any case, Jesus' overall language for God is diverse and colorful. Even his use of the paternal metaphor is not necessarily as frequent nor as central as traditional ecclesial use might suggest. Word count shows that God is referred to as father in the gospels with increasing frequency: 4 times in Mark, 15 in Luke, 49 in Matthew, and 109 in John. More precisely, the frequency with which Jesus calls God 'the father' breaks down even more dramatically: Mark 1, Q 1, special Luke 2, special Matthew 1, John 73. As James Dunn concludes, it is scarcely possible to dispute that "here we see straightforward evidence of a burgeoning tradition, of a manner of speaking about Jesus and his relation with God which became very popular in the last decades of the first century" (*Christology in the Making,* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980], P. 30). It is a matter of the growing practice of the early church rather than abundant use by the actual Jesus who lived.