

THE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF GOD AND THE IMAGE OF GOD MALE AND FEMALE

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THE HOLINESS and utter transcendence of God over all of creation has always been an absolutely central affirmation of the Judeo-Christian tradition. God as God—source, redeemer, and goal of all—is illimitable mystery who, while immanently present, cannot be measured or controlled. The doctrine of divine incomprehensibility is a corollary of this divine transcendence. In essence, God's unlikeness to the corporal and spiritual finite world is total; hence we simply cannot understand God. No human concept, word, or image, all of which originate in experience of created reality, can circumscribe the divine reality, nor can any human construct express with any measure of adequacy the mystery of God, who is ineffable. This situation is due not to some reluctance on the part of God to self-reveal in a full way, nor to the sinful condition of the human race making reception of such a revelation impossible, nor even to our contemporary mentality of skepticism in religious matters. Rather, it is proper to God as God to transcend all direct similarity to creatures, and thus never to be known comprehensively or essentially as God. In Augustine's unforgettable echo of the insight of earlier Greek theologians, if we have comprehended, then what we have comprehended is not God. This sense of an unfathomable depth of mystery, of a vastness of God's glory too great for the human mind to grasp, undergirds the religious significance of speech about God; such speech never definitively possesses its subject but leads us ever more profoundly into attitudes of awe and adoration.¹

It would be a serious mistake to think that God's self-revelation through powerful acts and inspired words in the Jewish tradition and through the history and destiny of Jesus Christ which give rise to the Christian tradition removes the ultimate unknowability of God. In the history of these traditions, revelation has in fact given rise to the "dangerous situation" in which the need to preach and interpret has resulted in words becoming too clear and ideas too distinct, almost as if

¹ See developments of the theme of divine incomprehensibility in Victor White, *God the Unknown* (New York: Harper, 1956); Charles Bent, *Interpreting the Doctrine of God* (New York: Paulist, 1968); Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1972), esp. "God as Symbol" 82-115.

they were direct transcripts of divine reality.² At times we have forgotten whom we are dealing with, and have created the impression that the unknown God is now available for inspection, caught within our narratives or metaphysical concepts. Revelation, however, cannot and does not dissolve the mystery of God; in its light we see ever more clearly the incomprehensibility of God as free and liberating love, love which chooses us without our deserving it, bears and removes our bondage, gathers us in. Even and especially in revelation God remains the wholly other, conceptually inapprehensible, and so God.

The contemporary challenge of atheism and the purification of the doctrine of God which meeting it entails has led theology in some measure to a new reappropriation of the insight of the best of the theological tradition that it is impossible to understand God. Now another challenge, from the perspective of believing women, holds the promise of deepening yet further this truth of the incomprehensibility of God, as well as promoting the human dignity of women—the two not being separable from one another.

The problem with the understanding of God which women theologians, out of personal experience of its debilitating effects, have identified is that it envisions God exclusively through analogy with the male human being, and does so with a pervasiveness and tenacity which at least raises the question of the success of the first commandment in eliciting obedience. Imagery for the divine throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition is taken predominantly from the roles and relations of men, God being named as lord, king, father, son. Likewise, male self-definition has shaped the metaphysical concept of God which developed from the encounter of biblical with Greek philosophical traditions. The latter had equated male reality with spirit, with mind and reason, and, most importantly, with act, reserving for female reality a contrasting intrinsic connection with matter, with body and instinct, and with potency. God as absolute being or pure act necessarily excluded all potency, passivity, and prime matter, and thus could be thought only in analogy with the human spiritually masculine to the exclusion of analogy with the feminine passive material principle. This assumption and its attendant androcentric presuppositions permeate the classical Christian philosophical doctrine of God as

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Unknown God," *The von Balthasar Reader*, ed. M. Kehl and W. Löser (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 184. Balthasar queries where one can find a work of dogmatics which gives the incomprehensibility of God significant expression; theological textbooks have forgotten it; even Barth does not hold on to it to the end. Research for this study has convinced me that he is right; material on incomprehensibility is not plentiful. For the relation of God's incomprehensibility to revelation, see also William Hill, *Knowing the Unknown God* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971) ii; Leo Scheffczyk, "God," *Sacramentum mundi* 2 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968) 382-87.

well as the specifically Christian doctrine of the Trinity.³ In a strikingly honest discussion of the issue, John B. Cobb summarizes: "Historically, whatever God's true nature and identity may be, God has been experienced, conceived, and spoken of as masculine," and this is a statement as applicable to metaphysical thinking about God as it is to religious images.⁴

The critique brought by women theologians against the exclusive centrality of the male image and idea of God is not only that in stereotyping and then banning female reality as suitable reference points for God, androcentric thought has denigrated the human dignity of women. The critique also bears directly on the religious significance and ultimate truth of androcentric thought about God. The charge, quite simply, is that of idolatry.⁵ Normative conceptualization of God in analogy with male reality alone is the equivalent of the graven image, a finite representation being taken for and worshiped as the whole. What is violated is both the creature's limitation and the unknowable transcendence of the true God. It is true that sophisticated thinkers will immediately deny that any maleness in image or concept of God is meant to be taken literally. Yet the association of God with maleness lingers on implicitly even in highly abstract discussions, as evidenced in statements such as "God is not male; He is Spirit." Such an association is also presumed to be normative, a point demonstrated empirically by the dismay often registered when and if God is referred to with feminine images or pronouns. If it is not meant that God is male when masculine imagery is used, why the objection when female images are used? But in fact an intrinsic connection between God and maleness is usually intended, however implicitly. In spite of the affirmation of divine transcendence, the predominant developments of the Judeo-Christian tradition have

³ See development of this thesis with focus on Augustine and Aquinas by Franz Mayr, "Patriarchalisches Gottesverständnis?" *Theologische Quartalschrift* 152 (1972) 224-55, and "Trinitätstheologie und theologische Anthropologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 68 (1971) 427-77; also Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism," *Religion and Sexism*, ed. R. Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) 150-83.

⁴ John B. Cobb, "God and Feminism," *Talking about God*, ed. J. B. Cobb and David Tracy (New York: Seabury, 1983) 79.

⁵ For expatiations on the charge of idolatry, from which the following section draws, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) 22-27; also her "The Female Nature of God," *God as Father?* (*Concilium* 143; New York: Seabury, 1981) 66; Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision," *Womanspirit Rising*, ed. C. Christ and J. Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 139; Rita Gross, "Female God Language in a Jewish Context," *ibid.* 169-70; Anne Carr, "Is a Christian Feminist Theology Possible?" *TS* 43 (1982) 296; Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, "De divinis nominibus: The Gender of God," *Worship* 56 (1982) 117-31.

lifted up the male way of being human to functional equivalence with the divine. More solid than stone, more resistant to iconoclasm than bronze, seems to be the male substratum of the idea of God cast in theological language and engraved in public and private prayer. Thus the critique: "It is idolatrous to make males more 'like God' than females. It is blasphemous to use the image and name of the Holy to justify patriarchal domination. . . . The image of God as predominantly male is fundamentally idolatrous" (as would be the image of God as exclusively female).⁶

Those who do not abandon the tradition because of its pervasive androcentrism but wrestle with it for its own deeper liberating truth propose by contrast an understanding of the unknown God derived from analogy with both male and female reality. The biblical creation narrative which presents both male and female created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27), and the early Christian baptismal hymn which sees that in the world re-created by God's redeeming love there is no more division by race, class, or sex but all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28), are taken as clues that male and female are identical in their capacity to be images of God. Hence God, who is beyond all imaging, is well presented by analogy with both, and not well conceived on the pattern of merely one. The very incomprehensibility of God demands a proliferation of images and a variety of names, each of which acts as a corrective against the tendency of any one to become reified and literal. Female images and concepts of God disclose the relative character of male images and bracingly restrict their claim to ultimacy. Use of "God-She" immediately indicates the inherent inadequacy of "God-He." The understanding that God lies beyond whatever is thought or said is realized in the use of diverse images which balance or negate each other and thus point profoundly to the mystery of the present God who remains unknown.

In my judgment, what is at stake in this issue is simultaneously the freeing of both women and men from constricting reality models and social roles, and the very viability of the Judeo-Christian tradition for present and coming generations. The challenge to male monotheism and/or male Trinitarian thought arising from new recognition of women's equality and human dignity is one of the strongest in the course of the Judeo-Christian tradition, presaging a real Copernican revolution. As Wolfhart Pannenberg has elucidated the dynamics of the history of religions, religions die when their lights fail, when they lose the power to interpret the full range of present experience in the light of their idea of God.⁷ If God is worshiped as the all-determining reality, the power over

⁶ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* 23.

⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Toward a Theology of the History of Religions," *Basic Questions in Theology 2* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 65-118; also his "Anthropology and the

all, then the truth of God is tested by the extent to which the idea of God takes account of currently accessible aspects of reality and by the ability of the idea of God to integrate the complexity of present experience into itself. If the idea of God does not keep pace with developing reality, the power of experience pulls people on and the god dies, fading from memory. Is the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition so true as to be able to take account of, illumine, and integrate the currently accessible experience of women? This is an absolutely critical question.

On the strength of the assumption that the incomprehensible mystery of God and the image of God male and female mutually support each other, this study intends to re-examine and correlate the tradition regarding both. Such an exploration serves to highlight one of the sources for the renewal of the idea of God within the tradition itself, and makes room for understanding female conceptualizations of God as not only legitimate but also necessary. Subsequently, with that assumption at least on the way to being established, three contemporary approaches to the renewal of the idea of God relative to women are examined, two of which, while possibly helpful for a time, are judged to be ultimately deficient. In the end we are left with a task yet to be done, the conceptualization of a God than which nothing greater can be conceived, a God worthy of the worship of all.

INCOMPREHENSIBILITY AND FEMALE IMAGING OF GOD

Biblical

The Scriptures contain no systematic development of the theme of God's unknowability but disclose awareness of this through repeated stress on God's holiness, transcendent otherness, and freedom of action in history. At the head of the list of commandments, God's otherness comes to expression in the ban on the making and adoring of images (Exod 20:2-5):

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God. . . .⁸

Question of God," *The Idea of God and Human Freedom* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 94-98; and his *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 301-26.

⁸ All biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University, 1965).

In view of the fact that despite the ban images of God at least in a verbal sense abound throughout the Scriptures, the intent of these commands would seem to be that of preventing both polytheism and magic, while insuring that any image used of the holy and free God remains cognizant of its own limitation.⁹ There is but one God, comparable to no other individual or corporate created reality.

Abundant references throughout the Torah and the prophetic and wisdom traditions spell out the implications of this insight. The holy name YHWH, signifying divine presence but not essence, is unfathomable (Exod 3:14). Even in the making of the covenant no one sees God's form (Deut 4:12, 15-16). God is a hidden God, impossible to compare with anything or anyone else (Isa 40:18, 25; 45:15). God the Holy One is God and not man (*sic*, Num 23:19; Hos 11:9). God is great, beyond what we can ever fathom (Job 36:26). The idea of divine incomprehensibility is not watered down with the advent of God in Jesus Christ. Rather, the mystery of the covenanting God remains the horizon within which early Christian believers interpret the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The God who raised Jesus from the dead cannot be captured in silver, gold, stone, or any representation of human imagination (Acts 17:29). God dwells in unapproachable light, and no human being has ever seen or can see the divine reality (1 Tim 6:16). God's knowledge is deep; the divine judgments are unsearchable; divine ways are inscrutable (Rom 11:33-36). Indeed, there is a sense in which the mysteriousness of God is brought to a more intense pitch in the awareness of saving love in Jesus Christ: "the mystery of divine incomprehensibility burns more brightly here than anywhere. . . ."¹⁰ Thus, while the Scriptures are the inspired literary precipitate of communities involved in *knowing* the one true God, biblical tradition itself bears witness to the strong and consistent belief that God cannot be exhaustively known but even in revelation remains the mystery surrounding our lives.

It is here that the biblical teaching of divine incomprehensibility intersects in a significant way with the question about God arising today from women's experience. One of the clearest signs of the unknowability of God in the Scriptures is the plethora of images, metaphors, and names for the Holy One. This very multiplicity signifies that the mystery surrounding our lives cannot be grasped by any one image or even in all taken together. What is significant for our purposes here is the fact that female as well as male images are used.

⁹ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 203-19; Christian Link, "Das Bilderverbot als Kriterium theologischen Redens von Gott," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 74 (1977) 58-85.

¹⁰ Balthasar, "Unknown God" 186. See treatment of the same theme in John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God* (New Haven: Yale University, 1964) 5-16.

Reflecting the patriarchal cultures in which the scriptural books were formed, the predominant biblical metaphors for God are taken from male experience, with God being depicted as father, warrior, jealous husband, king. At the same time there is an intriguing openness to the use of female images. The Scriptures depict God as mother, with all that this entails: pregnant with a child in her womb, crying out in labor, giving birth, nursing, carrying and cradling her child, comforting and having womb love (tender mercy and compassion) for her child. Given the frequency with which mention of God's merciful compassion occurs throughout Scripture and the liturgy, and given the root of this word in the Hebrew word for womb (*rhm*), such female imagery is far from peripheral in the tradition, although until recently unnoticed.¹¹ God is further envisioned in roles taken from other female experience such as midwife, nurse, seamstress, mistress of a household, and owner of money who searches for a lost coin that is very important to her, rejoicing with neighbors when it is found (the latter being imagery of God the Redeemer used by Jesus as depicted in Lk 15:8-10). Less immediately anthropocentric, God's presence and creative agency in the world is unhesitatingly depicted in words of feminine gender such as spirit (feminine in Hebrew, neuter in Greek) and wisdom (feminine in both). In the development of the latter, Jewish wisdom theology depicts female Sophia as a personification of the gracious goodness of the one God: she offers life, rest, knowledge, and salvation to those who accept her; she leads, preaches, corrects, sends prophets; she is called holy, all-powerful, intelligent, unique; she makes all things new (cf. Wis 7:22-30; 8; 9:1-2; Prov 1:20-33; 3:19; 8:1-31). In later Christian reflection Jesus' ministry is associated with the work of Sophia. A prophet sent by Sophia-God, he is depicted in the wisdom likeness of the mother hen gathering her brood under her wing, if only they would (Lk 11:49). Early Wisdom Christology moves even to identify Jesus with the female wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24-25), a Christology which forms the underlying pattern taken over by the later Logos Christology.¹²

¹¹ Recent research has been surfacing these overlooked scriptural and extrabiblical female images of God; see esp. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979); Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Elaine Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother?" *Womanspirit Rising* 107-119. The national Anglican/Roman Catholic Dialogue in the U.S. has significantly incorporated some of this imagery in its report "Images of God: Reflections on Christian Anthropology," *Origins* 13 (1984) 505-12.

¹² For NT Wisdom Christology, see James Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 163-212; R. Wilken, ed., *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1975); M. J. Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1975). For the

On the one hand, the Scriptures testify to the freedom and transcendence of God beyond the adequacy of any human expression; on the other hand, both masculine and feminine images (as well as metaphors taken from the natural world) are freely used to speak of this God. The two points are mutually related and reinforce each other. I venture to say that at certain key points there is even direct correlation, with authors the strongest on one also freest with the other. In the climactic scene of the book of Job, e.g., God speaks out of the whirlwind in an epiphany of transcendence which silences the challenging question of Job's suffering. In the midst of recounting inapprehensible creative acts, God asks (Job 38:28-29):

Has the rain a father,
 or who has begotten the drops of dew?
 From whose womb did the ice come forth,
 and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?

God father and mother, begetter and birth-giver, is the incomprehensibly powerful creator of all. Similarly, the author of Second Isaiah is unequalled for affirmations of God's transcendent mystery at the same time that female images are repeatedly used. God speaks as a woman, having compassion on the child of her womb or going into labor to bring the people forth: "Now I will cry out like a woman in travail, I will gasp and pant" (Isa 42:14). Continuing this tradition, the latter part of the book of Isaiah contains one of the most explicit references to God in female imagery in the Hebrew Scriptures: "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you" (66:13). The God who is comparable to no likeness can be imaged as birth-giving woman and loving mother as well as victorious warrior and compassionate father. Using the full range of images enables the mysterious goodness of God's ways with us to be realized ever more profoundly.

relation between the Sophia-God of Jesus and the discipleship of women, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 92-97. For study of the transition from the feminine Sophia to the masculine Logos in Philo and the NT, see Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 74-120. Engelsman's thesis that the feminine was subordinated in this move is disputed by Patricia Wilson Kastner, *Faith, Feminism and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 92-97. The latter contends that the sophiology behind and within Logos Christology introduces female elements into the portrayal of God active in the world through Christ, and overcomes sexism by combining characteristics usually attributed to male and female into the single notion of creativity.

Early Christian

When in the early Christian centuries the biblical tradition encountered the Greek philosophical tradition, a congeniality was discovered on precisely this point.¹³ The philosophical idea of God's inaccessibility to human conceptualization was rooted in the idea that the one ultimate origin of all things must be totally different from the everyday world of multiplicity and change. Finite and transitory structures cannot be traced back exactly to their distant origin, and thus the incomprehensibility of the one source of all is assured. This affirmation of the radical otherness of the world-ground in philosophical thought was attractive to early Christian theologians trying to understand theologically the scriptural theme that God is unknown but present in the world and in history, and the two understandings became wedded in their thought. While some, such as Justin, continued to appeal to the religious perspective, holding that God is nameless because unbegotten (there being no one prior to God to do the naming),¹⁴ more usual was the approach taken by Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus, who worked with the philosophical idea of divine simplicity to arrive at the understanding that God is thus unknowability by any category. God is beyond place and time and description, and the divine essence cannot be adequately designated by any name.

The danger here was that of giving the impression that revelation cleared up the provisional ignorance of the pre-Christian world, rather than remembering that God is *essentially* incomprehensible. Some theologians of this period can be read as having given in to this temptation; e.g., Tertullian's insight that one comprehends God precisely in knowing God as incomprehensible did not flow into his understanding of revelation, which was seen as providing a positive complement to divine mystery.¹⁵ However, in the struggle over the Eunomian thesis of the absolute intelligibility of the divine essence, later theologians took up clearly the theme of God's incomprehensibility and, while allowing a certain relatively limited knowledge of God on the part of creatures, saw ever more clearly that God's unlikeness to the world is total, so that we know best when we confess that we do not know (which in itself is a religious kind of knowing).

¹³ Cf. X. Le Bachelet, "Dieu IV: Sa nature d'après les Pères," *DTC* 4/1 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1939) 1023-1151. For specific contribution of the East, see Seely Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983) 1-11.

¹⁴ Justin, "The Second Apology," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1981) 190.

¹⁵ Critique by Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology," *Basic Questions in Theology* 2, 156.

This consciousness is paradigmatically expressed throughout the influential work of Augustine.¹⁶ All speaking of God must be born out of silence and ignorance and return there, for God is ineffable. We give God many names, but ultimately God is nameless, no name being able to express the divine nature. Since created perfections are a reflection of God, it is possible to predicate them of God; but none are said worthily of God. God *is* more truly than can be conceived, and is conceived more truly than can be expressed in speech. In the end, it is easier to say what God is not than what God is: if we have understood, then what we have understood is not God.

By the beginning of the sixth century these insights had been explicitly formulated into the principle of the threefold way of arriving at knowledge of God: the way of affirmation, negation, and eminence or transcendence.¹⁷ One attributes a characteristic activity or perfection to God, critically negates it, and then transcends the negation, so that an unspeakably rich and vivifying reality is intuited while God remains incomprehensible. Every concept and symbol, even the idea that God "is," must go through this purifying double negation for its own legitimacy. What we receive from ancient Christian theology is a tradition of gnosticism of affirmation coupled with an agnosticism of definition essential to the truth of God. In the end, we are united to God as to an unknown, savoring God only through love.¹⁸

Probably even less known than biblical female imagery for God is such imagery used by theologians of the early Christian centuries. Granted that the classical doctrine of God developed there is basically androcentric in image and concept, nonetheless such references are not infrequent and serve, explicitly in some cases, to reinforce realization of the incomprehensibility of God.¹⁹ God's loving activity in the eternal generation of the Son is likened to that of a mother, while the motive of the Incarnation is seen as God's maternal love (Clement of Alexandria). With reference to the human nature of Christ or to the Eucharist, both more accessible to us than the transcendent God, it is said that in giving them to us the Father nurses us with milk from the breasts of His goodness or that we are nourished with milk from the breast of the Word (Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus). Explicit critique is leveled at those foolish enough to think that God is male simply because of the use of the name "Father"

¹⁶ Cf. Stanislaus Grabowski, *The All-Present God: A Study in St. Augustine* (St. Louis: Herder, 1953); Michael Schmaus, *Dogma 2: God and Creation* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969) 24-27.

¹⁷ Cf. Hilary Armstrong, "Negative Theology," *Downside Review* 95 (1977) 176-89.

¹⁸ H. P. Owen, *The Christian Knowledge of God* (London: Athlone, 1969) 8-9.

¹⁹ Kari Elisabeth Børresen, "L'Usage patristique de métaphores féminines dans le discours sur Dieu," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 13 (1982) 205-20, from which the following examples are taken. Much work remains to be done in this area.

(Gregory of Nazianzus). God is both father and mother (Augustine), as is Christ in loving care for us (Augustine, Jerome, John Chrysostom). Christ, furthermore, is female wisdom incarnate (Hilary of Poitiers), the woman searching for the lost coin (Cyril of Alexandria), and mother wisdom under whose wings we flee for protection (Augustine). This use of female imagery works in tandem with the theme of divine incomprehensibility, with those who emphasize the latter having more room in their thought for the former. As the biblical translator and theologian Jerome noted from the perspective of his own discipline, the fact that the word for "Spirit" is feminine in Hebrew, neuter in Greek, and masculine in Latin indicates that God transcends all categories of sexuality and is indeed Spirit.

Medieval

The tradition of divine incomprehensibility began to find its way into Church doctrine when, to protect the otherness of God against 12th-century attempts to limn the divine essence in close similarity with the finite, the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 said of the perfection of Creator and creature: "each perfection of course in one's own way, because between them no similarity can be found so great but that the dissimilarity is even greater."²⁰ The intent of this formula was not to allow a certain zone of similarity to exist before dissimilarity would begin, but to emphasize that wherever likeness of God and creature begins, an even greater unlikeness is always present.

Against this background a breakthrough in systematic thought occurred when the scholastics of the 13th century worked out the theory whereby human speech about God is understood to be neither univocal nor equivocal in meaning, but analogical. This position, whose paradigmatic although far from clear expression is found in Thomas Aquinas, is characterized by a powerful apophatic element, a theological agnosticism more pervasive than has usually been acknowledged:²¹ "Now we cannot know what God is, but only what God is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which God does."²² Thus does Aquinas preface his mature discussion of the divine nature and of how God is known and named by us. No created mind can comprehend the essence of God, i.e., understand perfectly so that nothing is hidden from view. This is explained by means of an epistemology

²⁰ DS (32nd ed.) no. 806.

²¹ Scheffczyk, "God" 382, skips from Augustine to Nicholas of Cusa in his description of apophatic theology, omitting Aquinas altogether. By contrast, see Karl Rahner, "An Investigation of the Incomprehensibility of God in St. Thomas Aquinas," *Theological Investigations* 16 (New York: Seabury, 1979) 244-54.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) Preface to q. 3. See esp. qq. 12 and 13, on the knowing and naming of God.

which requires that for knowledge of anything, some sort of mental image or species be formed of what is known, an image which is always necessarily definite and finite. There can be no such image of the infinite; God is positively misrepresented if any one image is thought to be adequate. Only in the union of heaven, when God's own self takes the place of such an image, will we be able to "see" God, and even then our created minds will not comprehend infinite actual being. God, then, is outside of all classes and categories, and beyond the possibility of being imagined or conceived.

How, then, can we speak of God at all? On the basis of the relationship of creation by means of which God is cause of the world, it can be admitted that creatures participate in being and in some way resemble God (although in no way does God resemble creatures). Thus it is possible to speak positively of God, creator of all, through terms drawn from our knowledge of creaturely perfections. But since such perfections exist in God in a way that infinitely transcends their finite embodiment, such terms must go through the purification of the analogical movement of mind if they are to be considered in any way validly true. Words predicated of God are affirmed, then negated in their creaturely connotations, and finally affirmed of God in a supereminent way transcending all our cognitive capabilities. The "knowing" of God in this analogical process is accomplished not in a concept but in a judgment which affirms God as unconceptualizable but within the perspective opened up by the intelligible contents of a concept.²³ God is darkly surmised, while remaining in essence conceptually inapprehensible.

Aquinas differentiates between various types of words of human mintage that are used of God.²⁴ Metaphoric ones involve some form of concrete bodiliness as part of what they mean (God is a rock, a lion). Relational terms name God on the basis of divine relationship to creatures (God is our Savior). Substantial terms predicate a perfection which is proper to God's own essence (God is good, living, wise). These words are all used by us to name God, but they cannot, either singly or taken all together, name what God is *in se*. In every case the same simultaneous movement of affirmation, negation, and letting-go in a transcending affirmation is required in order for the word to be true: "All affirmations

²³ This is a disputed point among Thomistic interpreters; the present position reflects the position of Hill, *Knowing the Unknown God* 111-44. See also David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven: Yale University, 1975); Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Analogy and Doxology," *Basic Questions in Theology* 1, 211-38; David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) chaps. 5, 9, 10, for other interpretations.

²⁴ Otto Pesch, *The God Question in Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 9.

we can make about God are not such that our minds may rest in them, nor of such sort that we may suppose God does not transcend them."²⁵ Even assertions central to religious belief, such as "God exists," or is real, or is person, or three persons, must be understood analogically if they are to avoid the danger of ascribing existence, reality, or personality to God in the same sense in which they are ascribed to creatures. Nor does the situation brought about by God's revelation change this limitation of the power of the human mind. Revelation gives certain key images of God not attainable through natural reason, as well as the gift of a stronger intellectual light with which to understand divine works. But it never breaks open the divine nature for our conceptualization. Even in faith we remain united to God as to an unknown. With references to Chrysostom, Augustine, John Damascene, and Pseudo Dionysius, Aquinas systematically carries forward the tradition of divine incomprehensibility from the early Christian centuries: "The perfection of all our knowledge about God is said [by Dionysius] to be a knowing of the unknown, for then supremely is our mind found to know God when it most perfectly knows that the being of God transcends everything whatever that can be apprehended in this life."²⁶ Ultimately, the highest human knowledge about God is to know that one knows nothing about God.²⁷

The medieval period is rather poor in the use of female imagery for God. It is found mainly in the tradition of the motherhood of God, reflected in rare occasional utterances by a theologian such as Anselm and in works of mystics such as Dame Julian of Norwich.²⁸ While Aquinas does note that the Scriptures attribute to God the Father what in our material world belongs to both mother and father, namely, the begetting of the Son, he is powerfully prevented by his anthropological presuppositions intertwined with Aristotelian biology from attributing maternity to God. There is no place in his system for speaking of God as mother, for God is pure act, whereas in the process of begetting, the mother represents the principle that receives passively.²⁹

However, beyond the outdated anthropology, the understanding stemming from this period that all language about God is analogical assumes

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *De divinis nominibus* 1, 2.

²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *In Boeth. de trin.* 1, 2, ad 1.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia* 7, 5, ad 14.

²⁸ Anselm: "But you too, good Jesus, are you not also a mother? Is not he a mother who like a hen gathers his chicks beneath his wings? Truly, Lord, you are a mother too. . .," in *Prayer to St. Paul*, quoted in Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, ed. E. Colledge and J. Walsh (New York: Paulist, 1978) 87.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 4, 11, 19. Yves Congar in *Je crois en L'Esprit saint* (Paris: Cerf, 1980) comments in the third volume (206) that this is an argument that modern science has put to rest.

a strongly critical function when the androcentricity of the subsequent centuries is faced with the question of naming God arising from women's experience today. Now it becomes clear that it has not yet been sufficiently articulated that the critical negation of analogy should be stringently applied to male pronouns, images, and conceptualizations of God no less than to other predications of God. It has not yet been sufficiently appreciated that the designation "He" is subject to all the limitations found in any other positive naming of God, and in the end does not really tell us anything about God. Introduction of female expressions makes acutely clear that analogy still has a job to do in purifying God-talk of its direct (even if unintentional) masculine literalism and in opening room for a development of the doctrine of God in the direction of greater appreciation of the divine mystery.

As even a too-brief survey of the Judeo-Christian tradition makes abundantly clear, human words and concepts with their inevitable relation to the finite are not capable of comprehending God, who by very nature is illimitable and unobjectifiable. Clear signs of this unknowability of God include the proliferation of images, metaphors, and names predicated of God in the Scriptures, the apophatic theology of the early Christian centuries, and the medieval doctrine of analogy. Absolutizing any particular expression as adequate to divine reality is tantamount to a diminishment of God. The experience of women today is raising this question as never before. Made in the image and likeness of God, women participate in and represent in a creaturely way something of the perfection of divine being. Conversely, God can be expressed, however inadequately, in female as well as male imagery, as the Judeo-Christian tradition attests. Doing so has the immediate effect of bringing to consciousness the partiality of predominant male imagery and thus of deepening our sense of God's transcendence.

At the present time three approaches to the renewal of the idea of God in the direction of greater inclusivity can be identified. One seeks to give "feminine" qualities to God still understood predominantly as a male person. Another purports to uncover a "feminine dimension" in God, often finding this realized in the person of the Holy Spirit. A third seeks equivalent imaging of God according to the fulness of humanity both male and female. A brief presentation of each can provide the basis for critical assessment of their theological usefulness.

THREE APPROACHES TO REVISION

Feminine Traits

A first step taken toward the revision of the patriarchal God image is the introduction of gentle, nurturing traits traditionally associated with

the mothering role of women. The symbol of God as Father particularly benefits from this move. Too often this predominant symbol has been interpreted through association with traits associated with ruling men in a male-oriented society: aggressiveness, competitiveness, desire for absolute power and control, and demand for obedience. This certainly is not the *Abba* to whom Jesus prayed, and widespread rejection of such a symbol from Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud onward has created a crisis for Christian consciousness. But it is also possible to see God the Father displaying feminine, maternal features which temper "His" overwhelmingness. William Visser 't Hooft, e.g., argues that while the fatherhood of God is and must remain the predominant Christian symbol, it is not a closed or exclusive symbol but is open to its own correction, enrichment, and completion from other symbols, such as mother.³⁰ Thus gentleness and compassion, unconditional love, reverence and care for the weak, sensitivity to our every need, and desire not to dominate but to be intimate companion and friend are predicated of the Father God and make "Him" more attractive.³¹ A clue to the use of this approach is almost invariably the use of the word "traits": the Bible allows us to speak of maternal traits in God (Visser 't Hooft); we have forgotten it, but the God of revelation has feminine traits such as tenderness (Congar); to transform our overmasculinized culture, we need to relate to the feminine traits of God (O'Hanlon); God is not simply male but has matriarchal traits (Küng).³² God remains Father, but in a way tempered by the ideal feminine, so that we do not have to be afraid or rebellious against a crushing paternalism.

While this approach is appearing in the work of a fair number of male theologians trying to address the problem, and while it has the advantage of moving counter to the misogyny which has so afflicted Christian anthropology and the doctrine of God, women theologians are virtually unanimous in calling attention to its deficiencies and in precluding it as a long-range option.³³ The reasons for this are several. Even with the introduction of presumably feminine features, the androcentric pattern remains: God is still envisioned as a masculine God, only now possessing feminine characteristics. This is clearly seen in statements such as: God is not exclusively masculine but the "feminine-maternal element must

³⁰ W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Fatherhood of God in an Age of Emancipation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) 133.

³¹ List of characteristics of the feminine offered by Daniel O'Hanlon, "The Future of Theism," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 38 (1983) 8.

³² Visser 't Hooft, *Fatherhood of God* 133; Congar, *Je crois* 3, 207; O'Hanlon, "Future of Theism" 7-8; Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980) 673.

³³ E.g., Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* 69, 128-32; Schmidt, "De divinis nominibus" 125; Børresen, "L'Usage patristique" 219.

also be recognized in Him."³⁴ God remains "Him," but imaged as a more wholistic male person who has integrated His feminine side. The patriarchy of God in this symbol is now benevolent, but it is nonetheless still patriarchy. And while the image of God as male as well as real male persons made in "His" image benefit and grow from the opening of nurturing and compassionate qualities in themselves, there is no equivalent attribution to a female symbol or to real female persons of corresponding presumably male qualities of rationality, power, the authority of leadership, etc. Men gain their feminine side, but not women their masculine side (if such categories are even valid). The feminine is there for the enhancement of the male, but not vice versa. Real women are then seen as capable of representing only the feminine element of what is still the male-centered symbol of God, the fulness of which can thereby be represented only by a male person. The female can never appear as icon of God in all divine fulness equivalent to the male. Inequality is not redressed but subtly furthered, as the androcentric structure of anthropology and the image of God remains in place and is made more appealing through the subordinate inclusion of feminine traits.

A critical issue underlying both this approach and the one to be considered next is that of the legitimacy of the rigid stereotyping involved in designating certain human characteristics as predominantly masculine or feminine. With what right are compassionate love, reverence, and nurturing predicated as primordially feminine characteristics, rather than human ones? Why are strength, sovereignty, and rationality exclusive to the masculine? Could it not be, as Ruether formulates the fundamental question, that the very concept of the "feminine" is a creation out of patriarchy, an ideal projected onto women by men and vigorously defended because it functions so well to keep men in positions of power and women out of public roles?³⁵ Masculine and feminine are among the most culturally stereotyped words in the language. This is not to say that there are no differences between women and men, but it is to question the justification of the present division and distribution of human virtues and attributes. Such stereotyping serves the true humanity of neither women nor men and results in a dualism in anthropology almost impossible to overcome. It does not, then, serve well for the re-envisionment of God in a more inclusive direction.

³⁴ Kung, *Does God Exist?* 673.

³⁵ Ruether, "The Female Nature of God" 65. Contemporary use of the concept of the feminine is usually related to the categories codified by Carl Jung; cf. Naomi Goldenberg, "A Feminist Critique of Jung," *Signs*, Winter 1976, 443-49, and her unpublished dissertation at Yale University, 1976, *Important Directions for a Feminist Critique of Religion in the Works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung*.

A Feminine Dimension of the Divine

Rather than merely attribute stereotypical feminine qualities to a male-imagined God, a second approach seeks a more ontological footing for the existence of the feminine in God. Most frequently that inroad is found in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, who in classical Trinitarian theology is coequal in nature with the Father and the Son. Biblically, the Spirit is of feminine character, as is seen not only by the feminine gender of the Hebrew *ruah*, but by the use of the female imagery of the mother bird hovering or brooding to bring forth life, imagery associated with the Spirit of God in creation (Gen 1:2) and at the baptism of Jesus (Lk 3:22) among other places. Semitic and Syrian early Christians continued to construe the Spirit as feminine, attributing to the Spirit the motherly character which certain parts of the Hebrew Scriptures had already found in God.³⁶ The Holy Spirit is the maternal aspect of God, who brings about the incarnation of Christ, new members of the Body of Christ in the waters of baptism, and the body of Christ through the epiclesis of the Eucharist. The custom of thinking of the Holy Spirit as feminine waned in the West along with the habit of thinking very extensively about the Holy Spirit at all. As Heribert Mühlen observes, when most of us say "God," the Holy Spirit never comes immediately to mind; rather, the Spirit seems like an edifying appendage to the doctrine of God.³⁷ Even Thomas Aquinas had difficulty with this, saying that the Holy Spirit suffers from a poverty of terminology, so that the relation of Spirit to Father and Son must remain in some way unnamed.³⁸ It is pointed out today that one source of Aquinas' problem was the metaphysical concepts of person and being with which he was operating. Being of patriarchal origin and predicating less than full personhood of women, they could not bring the personality of the Holy Spirit, which is feminine, fully to expression.³⁹

Theologians such as Congar in his trilogy on the Holy Spirit and Moltmann in his works on the Trinity are now trying to retrieve the full Trinitarian tradition while overcoming its inherent patriarchy by emphasizing the Holy Spirit as the feminine principle of the Godhead. Congar argues that a pretrinitarian monotheism and/or a Christomonism, with its forgetfulness of the Holy Spirit, always leads to patriarchy

³⁶ Cf. Robert Murray, "The Holy Spirit as Mother," *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (London: Cambridge University, 1975) 312-20; P. A. De Boer, *Fatherhood and Motherhood in Israelite and Judean Piety* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

³⁷ Heribert Mühlen, "The Person of the Holy Spirit," *The Holy Spirit and Power*, ed. Kilian Mc Donnell (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975) 12.

³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 37, a. 1.

³⁹ Mayr, "Trinitätstheologie" 471.

and male domination; rediscovering the Holy Spirit as maternal gift and love performs the double task of rebalancing the doctrine of God and promoting the value of women.⁴⁰ Moltmann connects monotheism with patriarchy, and pantheism with matriarchy, arguing that only panentheism with a corresponding Trinitarianism (including the feminine Holy Spirit) can lead to true community of women and men without privilege or subjection.⁴¹

There is a sense in which this approach can be helpful, especially for those whose thought tends to begin within the dogmatic or liturgical traditions. Indeed, when the full range of the theology of the Spirit is brought to bear, the effect can be quite powerful. The Spirit is equal to Father and Son. She goes forth so that the hidden Pantocrator can be made known:

In the divine economy it is not the feminine person who remains hidden and at home. She is God in the world, moving, stirring up, revealing, interceding. It is she who calls out, sanctifies, and animates the church. Hers is the water of the one baptism. The debt of sin is wiped away by her. She is the life-giver who raises men [*sic*] from the dead with the life of the coming age. Jesus himself left the earth so that she, the intercessor, might come.⁴²

This amounts to a revaluation of the feminine both in God and in humanity.

But it is not enough. The Spirit may be the feminine aspect of the divine, but the endemic difficulty of Spirit theology insures that she remains rather unclear and invisible. A deeper theology of the Holy Spirit, notes Walter Kasper in another connection, stands before the difficulty that unlike the Father and Son, the Holy Spirit is "faceless."⁴³ While the Son has appeared in human form and while we can at least make an image of the Father, the Spirit is not graphic and remains the most mysterious of the three divine persons. For all practical purposes, we end up with two males and an amorphous third. Furthermore, the overarching framework of this approach remains androcentric, with the male principle still dominant and sovereign. The Spirit even as God remains the "third" person, easily subordinated to the other two, since she proceeds from them and is sent by them to mediate their presence and bring to completion what they have initiated. The extent to which

⁴⁰ Congar, *Je crois* 3, 215–17.

⁴¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 57, 164–65.

⁴² Jay G. Williams, "Yahweh, Women and the Trinity," *Theology Today* 32 (1975) 240.

⁴³ Walter Kasper, *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1982) 246, 273–74. Kasper does not deal with the Holy Spirit as feminine or any other aspect of our question in this book.

this can go can be seen in Franz Mayr's attempt to understand the Holy Spirit as mother on the analogy of family relationships: if we liberate motherhood from a naturalistic concept and see it in its existential-social reality, then we can indeed see how the mother comes from the father and son, that is, how she receives her existential stamp and identity from them within the family.⁴⁴ While intending to rehabilitate the feminine, Mayr has again accomplished its subordination in unequal relationships.

The problem of stereotyping discussed before also plagues this approach. More often than not, those who use it associate the feminine with unconscious dreams and fantasies (Bachiega), or with nature, instinct, and bodiliness (Schrey), or with prime matter (Mayr), all of which is then said to be both endemic to God and experienceable as divine through the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵ The equation is set up: male is to female as transcendence is to immanence, with the feminine Spirit made the bearer of the experience of God's interiority to us. This stereotyping appears even in the creative attempt of process theologian John B. Cobb to come to terms with the charge of male idolatry in worship and thought. While acknowledging that "currently the received polarity of feminine and masculine is under consideration,"⁴⁶ he goes on to identify the Logos, the masculine aspect of God, with order, novelty, demand, agency, transformation; and the kingdom, or the feminine aspect of God equivalent to the Holy Spirit, with receptivity, empathy, suffering, preservation. The lines are drawn: the Logos provides ever-new initial aims and lures us always forward, while the feminine aspect of God responds tenderly to our failures and successes, assures us that whatever happens we are loved, and achieves in her whole life a harmonious wholeness of all that is. Besides the very real question of whether nature or culture shapes this description of roles, their effect on the perception of the being and function of real women is deleterious and restrictive. Nurturing and tenderness simply do not exhaust the capacities of women, nor do bodiliness and instinct define women's nature, nor is creative transformative agency beyond the scope of women's power. Ruether's question returns again in force, as to whether the very concept of the

⁴⁴ Mayr, "Trinitätstheologie" 474. This is reminiscent of Basil of Caesarea, who at one point held that the Holy Spirit was equal in nature but not in rank or dignity with the Father and the Son (*Contra Eunomium* 3, 2 [PG 29, 657c]). While he later changed his position, the whole incident is illustrative of the tendency to subordination connected with the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁵ Mario Bachiega, *Dio Padre o Dea Madre?* (Florence, 1976) 125; H. H. Schrey, "Ist Gott ein Mann?" *Theologische Rundschau* 44 (1979) 233; Mayr, "Trinitätstheologie" 469.

⁴⁶ John B. Cobb, "The Trinity and Sexist Language," *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 264. George Tavard sets up the same polarity in *Woman in Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1973) 195-99, but then questions it on the basis of the difficulties it presents.

“feminine” which supposedly defines the essence of real women is not a patriarchal creation, useful insofar as it relegates women to the realm of the private and the role of succoring the male. Understanding the Holy Spirit as the bearer of the feminine is no final solution. Even at its best, it does not exhaust the possibilities for discovering the fulness of God or humanity.

The Image of God Male and Female

While both the “traits” and the “dimension” approach are inadequate for the reinterpretation of the doctrine of God in the light of women’s dignity and freedom, since in both an androcentric focus remains dominant, a third approach images God equivalently as male and female. This approach shares with the other two the fundamental assumption that language about God as personal has a special appropriateness. Behaviorism notwithstanding, human persons are the most mysterious and attractive reality that we experience, and the highest order of being on this earth according to the metaphysical tradition. God is not a person as anyone else we know, but the language of person evokes in a unique way the mysteriousness, nonmanipulability, and freedom of action associated with God.

Predicating personality of God, however, immediately involves us in the question of gender, for all the persons we know are either male or female. God is properly understood as neither male nor female. But insofar as God created both male and female in the divine image and is therefore the source of the perfection of both, God can be represented equally well by images of either. Both are needed for a less inadequate imaging of God, in whose image the human race is created. This “clue”⁴⁷ for speaking of God in the image of male and female has the advantage of making clear at the outset that women enjoy the dignity of being made in God’s image and are therefore capable as women of representing God. Simultaneously, it relativizes undue emphasis on any one image, since pressing the fulness of imagery shows the partiality of images of one sex alone. The incomprehensible mystery of God is brought to light and deepened in our consciousness through the imaging of God male and female, beyond any person we know.⁴⁸

It has already been noted how the biblical, early Christian theological,

⁴⁷ Phyllis Trible’s expression, used throughout *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*.

⁴⁸ Herbert Richardson recounts the following personal recollection. As a child he was taught to say as a bedtime prayer “Father-Mother God, loving me, guard me while I sleep, guide my little feet up to thee.” It was thereby borne in upon his young mind that if God is both Father and Mother, God is different from any one thing he experienced around him (*Women and Religion*, ed. E. Clark and H. Richardson [New York: Harper & Row, 1977] 164–65).

and mystical traditions, though drawing a predominance of God imagery from male reality, also use female images of God without embarrassment or explanation. These images and personifications are not considered feminine aspects or features of the divine, to be interpreted in dualistic tension with masculine dimensions or traits, but representations of the fulness of God in creating and redeeming. Since it brings us into a world of thought different from our customary one, reference to ancient religions that worshiped gods and goddesses may be helpful in clarifying this thrust of the third approach (although in no way is it being suggested that monotheism be compromised). In those religions, as evidenced in their psalms and prayers, the gods and goddesses were not stereotyped according to the later idea of masculine and feminine, but each could represent the fulness of divine attributes and activity. In them "gender division is not yet the primary metaphor for imaging the dialectics of human existence,"⁴⁹ nor is the idea of "gender complementarity" present in the ancient myths. Rather, male and female are equivalent images of the divine. A goddess such as Ishtar, e.g., is addressed as the expression of divine power and sovereignty in female form, a deity who performs the divine works of dividing heaven from earth, setting captives free, waging war, establishing peace, administering justice, exercising judgment, and enlightening human beings with the truth—as well as presiding over birth, healing the sick, and nurturing the little ones.⁵⁰ When a god (e.g., Horus) is addressed, he has similar functions. Both male and female are powerful in the private and public spheres.

The point for our interest is that the goddess is not the expression of the feminine dimension of the divine, but the expression of the fulness of divine power and care shown in a female image. A case can be made for a similar implicit understanding present in the Christian Gospels in the parallel parables of the shepherd looking for the sheep and the woman searching for the lost coin (Lk 15:4–7, 8–10). In both stories God vigorously seeks what is lost and rejoices when it is found. Neither story discloses anything about God that the other hides. Using traditional men's and women's work, both parables orient us to God's redeeming action in images that are equivalently male and female. The woman and the coin image, while not portrayed in Christian art as frequently as the shepherd, is essentially as legitimate a reference to God as is the latter. Conversely, God imaged this way cannot be used to validate role stereotyping, wherein the major redeeming work in the world is done by men to the exclusion of women.

⁴⁹ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* 52.

⁵⁰ In Frederick Grant, *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism* (New York: Liberal Arts, 1953) 131–33.

The understanding of the power of equivalent images for God is applicable as well to the specifically Christian doctrine of the Trinity. While this doctrine took shape under the hegemony of a patriarchal understanding of God and humanity, exclusively male imaging is not essential for understanding the inner-Trinitarian relations or the missions *ad extra*. Starting with Paul Tillich, a number of theologians have combed the tradition for elements usable in re-envisioning not only the Holy Spirit but all three "persons" in God in nonmasculine ways.⁵¹ The unoriginate creator and continuing source of life can be named Mother as well as Father; neither image is sufficient but either is appropriate. As Moltmann struggles to express it, God is both "motherly Father" and "fatherly Mother."⁵² Using both renders the unoriginate Creator God more intelligible in a culture which no longer sees the sole active principle in human generation as male, and more believable in a time which begins to recognize how the Father God symbol has been used to reinforce patriarchy and male dominance to the distortion of both male and female humanity. The first person generates the second, self-expressing the fulness of divine life in the eternal Word. The Father-Son imagery traditionally used to express this relation within God can be shifted to Mother-Daughter without proportionally changing the relation. Furthermore, an understanding of how the Hebraic female Sophia theology shaped and penetrated the Logos doctrine brings to light the fluidity of gender symbolism already present in expressions of the second person. The undoubted human maleness of Jesus, without whom there would be no Christian doctrine of the Trinity, is not an obstacle to this re-envisionment unless it is interpreted naively as revelatory of the maleness of God. Wisdom Christologies attest to Jesus Christ as child of Sophia-God, sent to gather the lost and broken under her merciful wings, and even as Sophia herself. In a paradoxical way, the union of female divine

⁵¹ See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963) 293-94; Margaret Farley, "Sources of Inequality in Christian Thought," *Journal of Religion* 56 (1976) 173-74, and "New Patterns of Relationship," *TS* 36 (1975) 640-42; Letty Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 100-103; Wilson Kastner, "Faith" 92-97, 133-34; Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* 57, 164-65.

⁵² Moltmann, *ibid.* 164. Jesus' use of *Abba* for God does not bind Christians to exclusive use of the word "Father" for God, insofar as Jesus envisioned God in other ways as well (cf. the parables); insofar as the English word "Father" is questionable as an accurate translation of *Abba* (cf. Schmidt, "De divinis nominibus" 122, and H. Paul Santmire, "Retranslating 'Our Father': The Urgency and the Possibility," *Dialog* 16 [1977] 102, 104); and insofar as it is debatable whether fatherhood or the feminine *basileia* (reign of God) is the key image co-ordinating all others in Jesus' speech (Philip Harner, *Understanding the Lord's Prayer* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975] vs. Robert Hammerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979]).

Wisdom and male humanity in Jesus can appear as a most intimate marriage of all being. Identifying the Wisdom elements in Christology leads in fact to a healthy blend of male and female imagery that empowers everyone and works to signify the self-expression of the one redeeming God who is neither male nor female.

As for the bond of mutual love between the first and second persons, the Holy Spirit is quite susceptible to female imaging, as has already been shown. The point is, all "three persons" of the Trinity transcend categories of male and female; yet all can be spoken of in human metaphors drawn from either. The cautions to be sounded in using female imagery of the triune God are the same as for using male imagery: not to lose sight of the unity of God, forgetting that the language of "three" is analogical and not meant in a mathematical sense; not to utilize restrictive stereotypes; not to forget the radical limitations of any imagery of God, female ones to be sure, but also Father and Son, Word or Wisdom, or memory, understanding, and will.

Beyond particular images for each of the divine persons, the Trinity in a formal way gives a model of relationship marked by total equality and reciprocity rather than dominance and subordination. All that the first person is is communicated to the second; all that the second person receives is returned to the first; and the life of mutuality which they share is the third person, powerful Spirit of love. All uniquely give, all uniquely receive, all hold together a shared life. Creator, Word, and Spirit are simply mutually one. This is the ideal of human interrelationship, made more effective by the use of images taken from both genders.

Was John Paul I a heretic when he addressed God as our Father and Mother? After a review of the biblical and theological tradition, one thinker answered "no" to that question.⁵³ While the Pope's use of both genders was "daring," God goes beyond all images and can be named in concepts taken from male or female reality. The third approach examined here proceeds with the insight that only if God is so named, only if the full reality of woman as well as man enters into the conceptualization of God, can the idolatrous fixation on one image be broken and the truth of the mystery of God, in tandem with the liberation of human beings in all of our mystery, emerge for our time.

CONCLUSION

It is beyond dispute that we have no completely adequate name for God. Nevertheless, at first hearing, inclusive naming of God in the image of male and female may seem strange. Exclusively male naming of God

⁵³ Hans Dietschy, "God Is Father and Mother," *Theology Digest* 30 (1982) 132-33; from *Reformatio* 30 (1981) 425-32.

has predominated in the tradition and is deeply rooted, so that the shift of usage being envisioned here is indeed "seismic" in quality.⁵⁴ Given the new situation in which we find ourselves, however, this issue is ignored at peril of losing the relevance and, even more, the long-range credibility of the faith. There is a psychological inevitability of at least a degree of anthropomorphism in our idea of God. Even the sharpest, most self-critical mind can avoid only with difficulty (and then not always) the inclination to invest God with qualities of human personal reality with which one is well acquainted, among which gender is essential. God, however, is utterly transcendent, neither male nor female, yet creator of both in the divine image. Focusing on one to the exclusion of the other and clinging to that image has the religious effect of making God less God, at once restrictively expressed and too well known.

Since the concept of God defines and orients a whole way of life and understanding, sustaining a moral universe, the exclusive masculinity presumed in the traditional doctrine of God has also had profound consequences beyond the idea of God.⁵⁵ It has led to a distortion in Christian anthropology whereby men have theorized that the fulness of the divine image resides only or primarily in themselves, while women are derivatively or secondarily made in the image and likeness of God and thus subordinate. It has correspondingly sustained and legitimated institutional structures and personal interrelationships which are patriarchal in form, in which men alone by virtue of their maleness as representative of God may serve in positions of leadership and authority. Insofar as the systematic denigration of the human dignity of any one group of persons by any other group is considered to be morally reprehensible, in this inherited male-oriented concept of God intrinsically linked with such theory and practice there is at the very least a profound ambiguity.⁵⁶

Image-breaking is a part of religious traditions, because focusing on a fixed image not only compromises the transcendence of God, but petrifies and stultifies human beings into the likeness of the image worshiped, inhibiting growth by preventing further searching for knowledge of God. Calling into question the exclusively male idea of God does not spell the end of male imagery used for God; what has been destroyed as an idol

⁵⁴ Daniel Maguire, "The Feminization of God and Ethics," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 1982, 3; also Cobb, *Talking about God* 79-80.

⁵⁵ Functions of the concept of God are discussed in Kaufman, *God the Problem* 89-113, 169; Farley, "Sources of Inequality" 164-68; Kari Elisabeth Børresen, "The Imago Dei: Two Historical Contexts," *Mid-Stream* 21 (1982) 359-63; Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1974) 7-10.

⁵⁶ Kaufman, in *God the Problem* 112, n. 31, deals with the relation of the image of God to militarism; his insights apply equally well to sexism.

can return as an icon, evoking the presence of God. Using female imagery for God does not introduce a distraction from belief in the one God of the Judeo-Christian tradition; the use of startling metaphors opens up the possibility of new religious experience of the one Holy Mystery. The proposal to name God in the image of male and female holds the promise of renewing the tradition in line with one of its own best insights into the mystery of God, at the same time that it allies itself with emerging understanding of the human dignity of women. Our speech about God becomes more truly analogical at the same time that we slip the bonds of the stereotyping and subordination of persons. To paraphrase a Rahnerian axiom used with great beneficial effect in Christology,⁵⁷ the truth of the mystery of God and the liberation of human beings grow in direct and not inverse proportion.

⁵⁷ Rahner's original principle, expressed in a variety of synonymous ways, holds that nearness to God and genuine human autonomy grow in direct and not in inverse proportion; cf. "Jesus Christ," *Sacramentum mundi* 3 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968) 206.