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Naming God She: The Theological Implications

Elizabeth Johnson
Abstract
Elizabeth Johnson probes the theological implications of God symbolism, as well as the effect that symbolism has on conceptions of women's dignity and humanity. In the Boardman lecture, she argues that "how a group names its God has critical consequences, for the symbol of the divine organizes every other aspect of a religious system." Professor Johnson engages the work of other Christian and Jewish scholars who have addressed this issue to illustrate how far we have come, and perhaps, how far we still have to go. She is careful to acknowledge the dangers of naming God "She." One such danger is the possibility of losing the Christian heritage of the Trinity, which is based on the image of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all of whom have been imagined as male. However, Professor Johnson argues that the Trinity is not a "literal formula," and that the gendered terms were never intended to be the only permissible images of God for Christians. She concluded that only when the full mystery of the living God who is so complex and powerful as to be beyond gender is understood, can we move past the "idolatrous fixation on one image of God" that has dominated Christian thinking.

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CENTENNIAL LECTURE

NAMING GOD SHE:
THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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by
ELIZABETH JOHNSON

Edited by
Sandy Russell
The centennial Dana Boardman Lecture of Christian Ethics at the University of Pennsylvania, the thirty-seventh in the series, was delivered by Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ, Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University. Professor Johnson's lecture draws upon her work in She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (Crossroad, 1992), which probes the theological implications of God symbolism, as well as the effect that symbolism has on conceptions of women's dignity and humanity. In the Boardman lecture, she argues that "how a group names its God has critical consequences, for the symbol of the divine organizes every other aspect of a religious system." Professor Johnson engages the work of other Christian and Jewish scholars who have addressed this issue to illustrate how far we have come, and perhaps, how far we still have to go. She is careful to acknowledge the dangers of naming God "She." One such danger is the possibility of losing the Christian heritage of the Trinity, which is based on the image of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all of whom have been imagined as male. However, Professor Johnson argues that the Trinity is not a "literal formula," and that the gendered terms were never intended to be the only permissible images of God for Christians. She concludes that only when the full mystery of the living God who is so complex and powerful as to be beyond gender is understood, can we move past the "idolatrous fixation on one image of God" that has dominated Christian thinking.

Since the publication of in She Who Is in 1992, Professor Johnson has published Friends of God and Prophets: a Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints (Continuum, 1998), a work that began as a component of her project on Mariology, but grew into a book of its own. In it, Johnson argues that the communion of saints has historically been expressed in two incompatible images, companionship and patronage. She shows how the latter image gradually became dominant, and that it has recently become unappealing to many Western believers. Professor Johnson has also published "Wisdom and Apocalyptic in Paul," (1993), "The Function of Apocalyptic and Wisdom traditions in Romans 9-11," (1995), and edited Pauline Theology with David M. Hay in 1995 and 1997.

Sandy Russell
University of Pennsylvania
During the last decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the new sound of theologically trained women's voices has been heard in the field of theology. Diverse in cultures, intellectual perspectives, and religious traditions, these voices are making contributions that are inevitably challenging to classical, patriarchal norms but also surprisingly enriching to the core task of seeking understanding about matters of faith. One of the major areas where women have labored is central to any articulation of theology, namely, the image and concept of the divine, the One who is source, sustaining and saving power, and goal of the world, whom people call God. The importance of this work can hardly be overestimated.

How 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, for example, that speaks about God as a warrior and extols the way he smashes his enemies to bloody bits would promote aggressive group behavior among its adherents. On the other hand, a religion that preaches a God who lovingly forgives offenses would turn believers toward care for their neighbor and mutual peacemaking. The symbol of God functions. It is never neutral in its effects, but expresses and molds a community's bedrock convictions and actions.

Women's scholarship on this subject has made it piercingly clear that patriarchal naming of God in the image and likeness of the powerful ruling man has the effect of legitimating male authority in social and political structures. In the name of the male Lord, King, Father God who rules over all, men have the duty to command and control: on earth as it is in heaven. In Mary Daly's succinct, inimitable phrase: if God is male, then the male is God. Consequently, women have traditionally been marginalized in the religions, largely without formal voice or vote, excluded from the official
By challenging the bed-rock assumption of this arrangement, naming God in female images promotes change or, in religious terms, conversion of a community's mind and heart to the true equality of women. When female personifications of the divine are not feminine aspects to be interpreted in dualistic tension with masculine dimensions or traits, but are rather representations of the abundance of God in creating, redeeming, and calling the world to eschatological peace, then they operate with prophetic power to challenge the subordination of women and to promote more just, egalitarian relationships among members of a community. As the history of religions demonstrates, God-language alone is not sufficient to bring about this transformation; female deities and the subordination of women can and do coexist. But in the context of the social movement for women's equality and human dignity, which now reaches global proportions, speech about God has a unique potential for affecting change at a deep and lasting level. If God is she as well as he, obviously a profound, incomprehensible mystery beyond either, a new possibility can be envisioned of a way of living together that honors difference but allows women and men to share life in equal measure. God spoken of in this way cannot be used to validate role stereotyping wherein public and private realms are divided by gender, with men acting as head, lord, and king to the exclusion or marginalization of women. This linguistic, imaginative practice of naming God SHE thereby holds a radical promise of transforming change for both religious communities and the civic communities they influence.

It has been my privilege and passion to work on this issue, most visibly with my book She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse. In this Boardman lecture I would like to illustrate how far we have come on this issue and, in dialogue with other Christian and Jewish scholars who are responding, to assess more deeply some theological implications of naming God in the image of women rather than exclusively in the image of ruling men.

Concrete examples

Let us begin with concrete examples, the fruit of women's scholarship and pastoral creativity. I frame each example as a question in order to invite thought about what such naming might mean.

- What is going on when women biblical scholars today point out that the Hebrew word for God's mercy, rechem, comes from the root word for women's uterus, so that when scripture calls upon God for mercy, it is actually asking God to forgive with the kind of love a mother has for the child of her womb? In the words of Isaiah:

  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.
  Isaiah 49:15

In Phyllis Trible's memorable phrase, we witness here the journey of a metaphor from the wombs of women to the mercy of God. What happens when we make this an explicit part of our understanding of divine mercy rather than leave it tucked implicitly in the text?

- What is going on when women draw attention to long-neglected biblical texts about Holy Wisdom, Sophia in Greek, a female figure of power and might? Not only does she mother the world into birth, but, being all powerful, she also saves the world and makes people holy. In a retelling of Israel's history in the book of Wisdom, "She" leads the people out from slavery in Egypt, bringing them across the waters of the sea and leading them through the wilderness with fire and cloud (Wis 10:15-19). The biblical book of Proverbs opens with her crying out at the city gates, excoriating those who will not listen to her words of instruction, but promising that "whoever finds me finds life" (Prov 8:35) - words adapted to signal the saving significance of Jesus in John's gospel (Jn 10:10). Most tellingly, against her evil does not prevail (Wis 7:30). Far from being a mere aspect of the divine, in all her fullness "Divine Sophia is Israel's God in the language and gestalt of the goddess," as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has demonstrated.

- What is going on when women New Testament scholars today remind us that in Luke's gospel, right after Jesus tells the parable of the good shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to look for the one that got lost, he goes on to preach a parable with a female protagonist, a woman searching for her lost silver coin? Both parables depict the work of God the Redeemer, one in the imagery of male work, one in that of female work. But for all the churches and statues of the Good Shepherd, where are the churches dedicated to God the Good Homemaker? Where are the sermons that start like Augustine did: "Holy Divinity has lost her money, and it is us!"? Why has this seeker or money that is very important to her not become a familiar image of the divine?

- What is going on when women scholars of medieval religious history shed light on female mystics and their articulation of their experience of God
in female metaphors? To cite but Julian of Norwich and her daring view of God's courtesy:

As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. I understand three ways of contemplating motherhood in God. The first is the foundation of our nature's creation; the second is his taking of our nature, where the motherhood of grace begins; the third is the motherhood at work. And in that, by the same grace, everything is penetrated, in length and in breadth, in height and in depth without end; and it is all one love.

Why are we so forgetful of this blessed motherhood? What would result if the church began to use this language equivalently with that of divine fatherhood?

- What is going on when, in the tradition of Wisdom and Julian, Linda Reichenbecher, a young woman studying for ministry at the Presbyterian Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky in 1993, composes this meditation:

I stared at my doctor who had treated my burns, and in her eyes saw intelligence and care, and knew that I had looked upon the face of God.

I stared at the soft, worn hands of my grandmother, and in them saw the thousands of potatoes peeled to nourish her family, and knew that I had looked upon the face of God.

I stared at my small child's excited face at the beach, and in her saw new wonder at the world, and knew that I had looked upon the face of God.

I stared at the mother robin angrily diving at me as I came too close, and in her I saw fierce protection, and knew that I had looked upon the face of God.

I stared at the darkness of the night, and in it saw the constant companionship of my faith, and knew that I had looked upon the face of God.

-What is going on today when two Jewish women, Naomi Janowitz and Maggie Wenig compose a Sabbath prayer for their community that prays in part:

Blessed is She who spoke and the world became. Blessed is She. Blessed is She who lives forever, and exists eternally. Blessed is She who redeems and saves. Blessed is Her Name.

What would be the spiritual and political results if every sabbath saw religious communities of Jews and Christians praising Her Name?

- What is going on when Mary Kathleen Schmitt, an Episcopal priest, works for years with her whole parish to create inclusive language prayers for Sunday liturgy in a three-year cycle? One prayer for Christmas Day addresses God this way:

Maker of this earth our home,
You sweep the heavens with your starry skirt of night
and polish the eastern sky to bring light to the new day.
Come to us in the birth of the infant Christ,
that we may discover the fullness of your redemption throughout
the universe;
Mother and Child of Peace bound by the Spirit of Love,

What is going on in these and a multitude of other examples, I suggest, is that, coming to self-awareness in community with other women, women are resisting their own subordination by generating a rich array of images for God that focus on female, natural, non-hierarchical metaphors. Such language is part of an historic spiritual and intellectual journey now going on with great vigor. Long denied the dignity of being fully human and of being truly created in the image of God by a profoundly misogynistic tradition, multitudes of women are questing, on many different paths, for new expressions of religious language and celebration, new readings of the classic sources of religious traditions, and new patterns of spirituality that bless rather than demean the reality of being female. Respectful of their own equal human dignity, conscious of the harm being done by the manifold forms of sexism, and attentive to their own experiences of suffering, power and agency, they are engaged in creative "naming toward God," as Mary Daly so carefully calls it, from the matrix of their own experience: God as source, wellspring, and fountain of life, mother and womb of life, Shekinah and Sophia, lover, friend, angry prophet and indwelling spirit, among a plethora of other images. These metaphors are not just political correctives to dominant modes of seeing and behaving - though they are that. But just as significantly, they arise from and refer to real discoveries of the sacred in places...
where tradition had long stopped looking to find it—namely, in what is associated with the female. In this matrix feminist theologians, engaging in the traditional theological task of reflecting on God and all things in the light of God, are shaping new speech about God which, in Rebecca Chopp’s memorable phrase, are discourses of emancipatory transformation, pointing to new ways of living together with each other and the earth.  

My thesis in this lecture is that this new naming from the reality of women to the deep mystery of God can be parsed on two critical fronts. It has profound implications for how we think about and relate to the divine: God’s nature, personality, and actions in the world. It has critical consequences for the assessment and 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.

1. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TRUTH OF GOD

Taking the full measure of this implication cannot be done apart from recalling the three "ground rules" that govern all speech about God. The first and most basic is this: the reality of God is a mystery beyond all imagining. The infinitely creating, redeeming, and indwelling Spirit is so beyond the world and so within us as to be literally incomprehensible. The human mind can never fully know the divine essence. We can never wrap our minds completely around this mystery and exhaust divine reality in words or concepts. 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; Sallie McFague’s insistence that since no language about God is adequate and all of it is technically improper, we must rest content with models, parables, and metaphors.  

This not-knowing is not a provisional condition but a permanent one, even throughout eternity. We are little islands surrounded by a great ocean; we make little forays into the sea, but the depths of the ocean forever exceeds our grasp. It is a matter of the livingness of God. Looking ahead in our argument, we can see that given the inexhaustible mystery inherent in what the word God points to, historically new attempts at articulation are to be expected and even welcomed. If the concept of God confuses the infinity and the incomprehensibility of holy mystery, then, as Karl Rahner argues, "it actually postulates thereby a history of our own concept of God that can never be concluded."  

Consequently, there is a second ground rule: no expression for God can be taken literally. Human words proceed by way of indirectness, whether this be explained by the theory of analogy, which negates as well as affirms the meaning of the words used; or by the play of metaphor, which associates two disparate realities, letting the strangeness of their association shed light on the one lesser known; or by the function of symbol, which participates in that which it symbolizes but never brings it fully to expression. We are always naming toward God, in effect, using good, true and beautiful fragments that we experience in the world to point to the infinite mystery who embraces the world. To borrow Sallie McFague’s way of putting it, our words and images are like a finger pointing at the moon, not the moon itself. They set off from the spare, original, strange perfection of this world and turn our face toward the source and future of it all without capturing the essence of the mystery.

Looking ahead in our argument, we can see that the understanding that all speech about God is indirect assumes a strongly critical function when the androcentric character of traditional God-talk is faced. Now it becomes clear that the critical negation of analogy, metaphor, and symbol must be stringently applied to male images and concepts of God no less than to other aspects of divine predication if masculine literalism is to be avoided. The designation 'he' and the name Father are subject to all the limitations found in any words referring to God, and in the end do not really tell us anything essential about the divine. Only arrogance assumes that we can preside over the reality of God in our concepts.

"From this," Thomas Aquinas concludes, articulating the third ground rule, "we see the necessity of giving to God many names." If human beings were capable of expressing the fullness of God in one straight-as-an-arrow name, the proliferation of names, images, and concepts observable throughout history would make no sense. But since no one alone is absolute or adequate, a positive revelry of symbols is for the divine is needed to nourish the mind and spirit. Examples abound.

In the Bible, as Paul Ricoeur has lucidly shown, there is a polyphony of forms of discourse, all of them radically non-metaphysical, by means of which the community interprets its religious experience. Each of these forms of discourse - narrative, prophecy, command, wisdom writings, and hymns of celebration and lament - reflect different aspects of relationship to holy
mystery. "The referent 'God' is thus intended by the convergence of all these partial discourses;" yet God is still a reality which eludes them all.15 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, the Bible 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 the more domestic images of God as a woman giving birth, nursing her young, and dedicated to child care for the little ones. 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.16 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.

Islamic custom carries one of my favorite ways of illustrating the tradition of many names with its litany praising Allah. There are one hundred names in all - Praised be Allah the Almighty, the Compassionate, the Holy, the Peaceful, the Shelterer of the orphan, 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.17

Casting the net ever wider over all of the religious expressions of humankind gathers in an abundance of symbols almost too numerous to count. In African traditional religions, for example, names of God are shaped by strong communal experience and closeness to nature.18 The ultimate mystery is Alone the Great One, the Powerful One, Wise One, Shining One, the One who sees all, the One who is everywhere. He or she is Friend, the Greatest of Friends, the One you confide your troubles to, the One who can turn everything upside down, the One there from ancient times, the One who began the forest, the One who gives to all, the Rain-giver. While called Highest of the Highest and the Unknown, the divine is also named Queen of Heaven whose glory shines in mist and rainbow; the Great Spider, Great Spirit, Great One of the Sky, Protector of the Poor, Guardian of Orphans, the Chief, the Fire, the Almighty; Watcher of everything, Owner of everything, Savior of all. Many African terms for God translate as "the One who": the One who loves, who gives birth to the people, who rules, who makes children, who embraces all; the One who does not die, who has not let us down yet, who bears the world, who has seen many moons, who thunders from far-off times, who carries everyone on her back, who is heard in all the world; the One who blesses.

Indeed, western language of recent centuries appears thin and paltry when brought into contact with this polyphony resulting from the human search for appropriate names for God. Looking ahead in our argument, we can see that restricting God-talk to the image of ruling men and the patriarchal relation of father is frankly illegitimate given the religious necessity of many names for proper discourse about the mystery of God. Even in the face of all this richness, however, what Aquinas calls the "poverty of our vocabulary" perdures.19 Taking all the names together will not deliver an exhaustive understanding of God. 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.20 "If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God."21

These three ground rules of the incomprehensibility of God, the indirect, non-literal nature of religious language, and the necessity of many names for God are affirmed throughout Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition, and about them there is little dispute. Our situation, however, is quite different from what one would expect if these ground rules had been followed. For we inherit a God-language that is cast almost exclusively in male imagery. Why is this the case? Social analysis in a feminist perspective points to the public power of men in synagogue and church that results in their assuming the right of naming while the voices of women are excluded from shaping the religious heritage. Not only have ruling men named God exclusively in
who are different. Women were created second and sinned first, argues the
women, referred to as sexism with its structures of patriarchy, has rendered
women historically invisible and silent in the public culture of monotheistic
religions, relegating them to the margins of the sacred community.

Wealthy, powerful men of the upper class and privileged race thus serve
as the chief model for the divine, as can be heard in the most common divine
names: King, Lord, Father.22 God sits upon his throne like a monarch with
hosts of couriers to do his bidding; he gives laws which must be obeyed; like
a patriarchal head of household he governs his domain, being worthy of
respectful love. One of the clearest examples is Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel
ceiling painting of God the Creator, in which an old, white-bearded, mus-
cular man creates a younger man in his own image. This art reflects those
who are at the pinnacle of the society that creates it - older, white, males.
Why could God not be spoken about with qualities of someone who is
young, black, female, or all three in combination? But the image of the older
white man is tenacious. As Celie says in Alice Walker's The Color Purple:
"Can't git that white man off my eyeballs."23

Using male images of God to the exclusion of female and cosmic ones
almost inevitably makes God-talk become rigid and indeed literal. The result
in theological terms is nothing short of an idol. "It is idolatrous to make
males more 'like God' than females," Rosemary Radford Ruether logically
points out. "It is blasphemous to use the image and name of the Holy to jus-
tify patriarchal domination. ... The image of God as predominant male is
fundamentally idolatrous."24 Once while Ruether was speaking thus during
a conference, a male theologian stood up and took issue with on this very
point. In great exasperation he argued, "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?25 The conflicts that break out
over female naming indicate that, however subliminally, maleness is intend-
ed when we say God. Consequently, the absolute mystery of the infinitely
loving God is reduced to the fantasy of an infinitely ruling man.

Prophets and religious thinkers have long insisted on the need to break
down false idols and escape out of their embrace toward the living God,
speech about whom becomes in its own turn a candidate for critique when-
ever it is held too tightly. 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.26

What needs to be shattered according to feminist theological critique is
the stranglehold on religious language of God-He. Normative images and
concepts of God on the model of ruling men alone are theologically the
equivalent of the graven image, a finite representation set up and worshiped
as if it were the whole of divine reality. In spite of the tradition's insistence
on the radical incomprehensibility of God; in spite of the teaching that all
words for God, being finite, fall short of their intended goal; and in spite of
the presence of many names, images and concepts for the divine in the scrip-
ture and later Christian tradition, this tradition has lifted up the patriarchal
way of being human to functional equivalence with the divine. More solid
than stone, more resistant to iconoclasm than bronze, seems to be the ruling
male substratum of the idea of God cast in theological language and
engraved in public and private prayer.

In this context, naming God SHE has profound theological significance
for human understanding of God. Simply stated, it smashes the idol. By
relativizing masculine imagery, it breaks the stranglehold of patriarchal dis-
course and its deleterious effects. God is not literally a father or a king or a
lord but something ever so much more. Thus is the truth of God more great-
ly honored. This is not to say that the reality of male experience 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. But seeking the female face of God releases divine mystery from its
age-old patriarchal cage so that God can be truly God - incomprehensible
source, sustaining power, and goal of all the world, Holy Wisdom, indwelling Spirit, the ground of our being, the beyond in our midst, the
absolute future, being itself, matrix, mother, lover, friend, infinite love, the
truly incomprehensible holy mystery that surrounds and supports the world.
In an act critical for the integrity of theology, seeking the female face of God
functions to set free a greater sense of the mystery of the living God, the
central symbol of western religion.

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," 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."27 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 and likeness.

2. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DIGNITY AND EQUALITY OF WOMEN

An ambiguity about women's true humanity bedevils the Jewish and Christian traditions. On the one hand, we are said to be created in the image of God, and for Christians, redeemed by Christ, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and destined for eternal joy in heaven. But on the other hand, precisely because of women's embodiment, theology has diminished the strength of each of these markers of religious identity, seeing women as created 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 as a dangerous temptress to men's virtue (Tertullian).28 Behind all of these traditional, distorted but highly influential male definitions of women is the philosophical system of 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).29 By this logic women exist with an inferiority for which there is no remedy. By nature they must be subordinate to men here on earth, though heaven may bring equality in grace and glory.

As with any system of oppression, once this gets put in place structurally it begins to be taken for granted. Over time women internalize the image that the oppressive system feeds them, and instinctively think of themselves as less than worthy. As a powerful, intrinsic element in this system, the exclusively male image of God promotes this feeling, and consequently it reinforces, even legitimizes, patriarchal social structures in family, society and church. Language about the father in heaven who rules over the world justifies and even necessitates an order whereby the male religious leader rules over his flock, the civil ruler has domination over his subjects, the husband exercises headship over his wife. If there is an absolute heavenly patriarch, 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 and power.

This state of affairs has a profound impact on women's religious identity.

The God-symbol is not only a visual phantasy but a focus of a whole complex of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, emotions, views and associations, very deep and tenacious. For women, speech about God couched exclusively in male terms does not point to the equal participation of women and men in the divine ground. Male images allow men to participate fully in it, while women can do so only by abstracting themselves from their concrete, bodily identity as women. Thus is set up a largely unconscious dynamic which alienates women from their own goodness and power at the same time that it reinforces dependency upon men and male authority. 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 as salvific and distrust of female power in herself and other women as inferior and dangerous.30

The symbol of God functions. Speech about God in the exclusive and literal terms of the patriarchy is a tool of subtle conditioning which operates to debilitate women's sense of dignity, power and self-esteem.

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. We are being converted from trivializing ourselves to honoring ourselves as genuinely equal images of God and Christ. The shock of recognizing the negative in traditional definitions of women accompanied by the surge of self-affirmation against such devaluation entails both a new sense of self-with-others and a new naming of the holy mystery that is source, sustaining power, and goal of all. The artist says it best. In a dramatic play about the metaphysical dilemma of being black, being female, and being alive, Ntozake Shange captures in one line the dynamism of new experience of women's selves in tandem with new language about God. After
roiling adventures of prejudice, hurt and survival, a tall black woman rises from despair to cry out, "I found God in myself and I loved her, I loved her fiercely." 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 taking back the power of naming toward God out of their own reality. In turn, female images of God function to affirm the excellence of being women sexually, psychologically, intellectually, politically, socially, and religiously.

This has ramifications for women's well-being all over the world. As U.N. figures report, women who form 1/2 of the world's population do 2/3 of the world's work, receive 1/10 of the world's salary, own 1/100 of the world's land, form 2/3 of illiterate adults, and together with their starving children are 3/4 of the world's starving people. To make a dark picture even bleaker, women are bodily and sexually exploited, physically abused, raped, battered and murdered by men to a degree that is not mutual. Sexism is rampant on a global scale. Nor does it exist in a vacuum. Factoring in racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, colonialism, militarism, and supremacy over the earth, structures that interlock in diverse ways to shape women's lives, makes clear the complexity of oppressions against which women struggle for fullness of life.

Naming God SHE is not a panacea in and of itself, but it has powerful social, psychological, and spiritual effects. Reorienting the imagination at a basic level, this usage challenges the dominance of male power over women and facilitates the growth of the human dignity of women made in God's image. God as mother, lover, and friend of the world which is her body; God as grandmother giving courage in la lucha; God as matrix of life; directing the economy of the whole household; as indwelling ruah; as saving Sophia; as renewing and challenging female Spirit: in the name of this God, women and men are empowered to enter the struggle for justice for all women and their girl children who are now seen to be of inestimable value.

It is important to flag a danger to this enterprise of seeking the female face of God. This danger arises with the use of the category of the "feminine." Could it not be that this category, constructed in contrast with the so-called masculine, ensnares women in a gender stereotype, pigeonholing women in roles that forbid the function of headship, so that the "feminine" face of God becomes the ultimate justification for women's subordination?

Let me say at the outset that in a strong patriarchal situation where the human dignity of women and anything female is belittled, using the idea of the feminine seems to have a positive effect. It takes what is being disparaged and makes it into something good, something that masculine men cannot supply, and thus begins to create room for women to flourish. In theology, using the category of the feminine has the advantage of moving thought in a new direction, against the misogyny which has afflicted so much traditional Christian anthropology and the doctrine of God. My question, though concerns its ultimate effect: does it liberate women?

Intellectually, the critical issue underlying this question is the type of theological anthropology one is using. Currently, to paint with broad strokes, there are two main differing approaches to this question of what it means to be human before God. One, promoted by most liberation feminist theologians today, may be described as an egalitarian anthropology of partnership. In this view of the human race, sexual difference is vitally important but it does not become the sole, essential marker of a person's identity. Rather, one's gender combines with race, class, ethnic identity, historical, geographical, and social location, and cultural makeup to define each person as uniquely themselves. In this school of thought, diversity of personal characteristics and gifts is not predetermined by sex but ranges across a wide spectrum for women and men. In fact, the range of differences among women themselves ends up being just as great as differences between some women and some men. Social roles may fairly be engaged according to gift and inclination, not gender.

The other pattern of thought, promoted paradoxically by both radical feminists and those who favor patriarchal rule, may be described as an anthropology of complementarity. This view elevates sexual difference to such importance that it basically results in two different kinds of human nature. It divides human beings into two distinct types of people with two distinct sets of characteristics, masculine and feminine. Then it extrapolates from these distinct natures to claim that differing social roles for men and women are necessary.

This is a strongly dualistic anthropology: it casts women as polar opposites from men, assigns each pole a set of characteristics, and maximizes the difference between them. Some feminist thinkers then use this arrangement to argue for the superiority of the female. When this pattern is pressed into use by patriarchal thinkers, however, it inevitably prescribes subordination for women. For man is equipped by nature for action in the public realm, while "women's special nature," with its orientation to love and nurturing, is fit for the private domain of childbearing and care of the vulnerable. Caught in this binary way of thinking which results in real differences in political, economic, cultural, and religious power, women have unequal say in the way the world is run.

A good example of the way this anthropology of complementarity functions can be found in the teaching of John Paul II which is exemplary of many conservative theologians. In his encyclical on women, Mulieris Dignitatem, the pope clearly separates the two sexes in their essence,
emphasizing that the distinctive quality of women's nature resides in her ability to love. Women have specifically feminine qualities, he writes, and these must be considered so that the responsibilities and functions of women be in accord with their true nature. Women are givers of life and consecrated by nature to its service. Women are more sensitive to what is required for the flourishing of persons. Women show greater capacity for interpersonal relations. And women have a greater capacity for self-sacrifice. Men on the other hand are viewed as better suited to the world of ideas, structures, leadership, and administration. There is real advance here from the classical tradition where women were vilified and denied the dignity of being persons truly created in the image of God. The Pope emphatically affirms the equality of women and men in this regard. Nevertheless, because of his dualistic anthropology, he insists just as emphatically that there is an essential difference between women and men; that women's feminine nature, the archetype of which is the virgin Mary, Mother of God, has a distinctive quality that orients them to their reproductive function and the works of love; and that this essential difference between feminine and masculine natures mandates different social roles, including that of the ordained priesthood. If women reject this, he warns, they risk becoming masculinized.

As any number of women scholars have commented, what results is a kind of romantic feminism: women are so ordered to the realm of love that they are too good to get involved in the inferior messiness of the public realm. Many women respond as did one of my college students in a paper on this encyclical: "As a young woman of the late twentieth century, do I want to be so highly exalted? No, I would rather be equal." The point being, of course, that by boxing women's identity into a narrow range of so-called feminine qualities, even the wonderful capacity to love, this dualistic anthropology inevitably privileges men in terms of psychological and political power. Vast numbers of western women today do not find this true to their own experience. And ironically it shortchanges men, who by definition cannot fulfill Christ's teaching to love God and neighbor as well as women can.

Rosemary Radford Ruether astutely asks the fundamental question that needs to be addressed here: is it not the case that the very concept of the "feminine" is a patriarchal invention?38 Does it not originate in a sexist society in which women are inculcated to develop certain characteristics pleasing to men? Does it not simply endorse the patriarchal status quo, denying women access to shaping the community's cultural institutions, laws, and symbols? Is it not an ideal projected onto women by men and vigorously defended because it functions so well to keep men in positions of public power and women in positions of service to them in the private realm?

African American theologians such as Shawn Copeland and Delores Williams, and Hispanic/Latina theologians such as Pilar Aquino and Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz raise the further criticism that the concept of the feminine is shaped by the privilege of race and class.39 It is white, middle-class women who can enjoy the qualities of being feminine, for they have not known the struggle for survival engaged by generations of slaves or marginalized immigrants. In fact it requires the existence of such "non-feminine" women to do the sexual and domestic scut work of society so middle-class women can have the luxury of being feminine according to the ideal. The freed slave, New Yorker Sojourner Truth put her finger on this racist and classist underbelly of the notion of the feminine in her justly famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech, which goes in part:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches ... Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over mud puddles, or give me any best place. And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arms! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well. And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?40

Indeed, who is a woman, and who gets to decide? I suggest to you that masculine and feminine are among the most culturally stereotyped terms in our language, created by a sexist, racist, and classist society. This is not to say, of course, that there are no differences between women and men. But it is to reject the traditional categories of masculine and feminine as adequate to describe real, concrete persons in all our range of diversity. By what right are compassionate love, reverence and nurturing claimed to be 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. On the contrary, I suggest, nurturing and tenderness simply do not exhaust the capacities of women; nor do boddiness and instinct define women's nature; nor are intelligence and creative transformative action beyond the scope of women's power; nor can women simply be equated with mothering, affectivity, darkness, and receptivity without suffocating their human dignity; nor, for that matter, can mothering be reduced to nurturing.
Let us return to the face of God. Naming so-called feminine qualities in God without analyzing this dualistic danger does not lead to liberation. A number of men theologians now speak of feminine traits or dimensions or a feminine aspect or side in God. By feminine what is usually meant is a gentle, nurturing nature; a non-assertive, non-competitive attitude; a total, accepting love culturally associated with women's mothering role; receptivity and empathy, tenderness and compassion. Scholars who take this route frequently buttress their constructive theories with what they take to be Jungian ideas, associating the feminine with the unconscious, with dreams and fantasies, with eros rather than logos, with darkness, death, depth, and receptivity, or with nature, instinct, emotion, and bodiliness, all of which in some way then attribute to God.

But watch what then happens to both God and women. Only a partial identification can be made between them, the feminine divine reflecting only some idealized aspects of the characteristics of the vast, diverse range of real women in history. Furthermore, these feminine qualities that are predicated of God still need to be complemented by the so-called masculine traits of reasonableness, power, justice-making, headship, and so forth. Finally, in the interaction of these masculine and feminine traits, the masculine is still ultimately dominant.

In a word, attributing feminine qualities to God allows the patriarchal model to persist. 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 mold. The feminine is thereby incorporated in a subordinate way into a symbol of the divine that remains predominantly masculine. What we do not enjoy is an icon of God in all divine fullness and strength in female form.

What is the practical effect of this 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, power, the ability to act and transform, authority, leadership, transcendence, and so forth. The symbol of God functions. Attributing the stereotypically feminine to God allows the feminine to be there for the enhancement of the male, but not vice-versa: there is no mutual gain. 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 sum, actual women remain subordinate. Such an understanding of God is adequate neither to the truth of God nor justice for women.

By contrast, granting all diverse women full membership in the human race allows female metaphors to 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, taking initiative, creating-redemeing-saving, angry against injustice, and struggling with and victorious over the powers of this world. The full and still-developing historical reality of women is the source for female icons of the living God in all Her fullness and strength. And women are blessed in the naming.

**CONCLUSION**

We have been pondering the dynamic process of how imaging God creates worlds. We have been exploring the claim that if women are created in the image of God, then God can be spoken of in female metaphors as adequate and as inadequate a way as God is imaged in male ones, without talk of feminine dimensions reducing the impact of this imagery. This has profound implications for the truth about God, for women's equal human dignity, and thereby 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 images of God is not without its dangers. Some fear that Christians will lose their true heritage, which is intertwined with the name of 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. But it is not a literal formula, nor was it ever intended to be the only way that Christians name God. As indicated in my opening examples, a number of sources support efforts to use female names: the witness of the scriptures with their multitude of images; the example of Jesus who spoke about God in many startling ways (the Gospel of John, which depicts Jesus frequently referring to God as Father, was written late in the first century and reflects the growing practice of the community, not of Jesus himself); and the writings of early Christian writers and later mystics who employed maternal and wisdom references. There is, too, the added experience of women today, empowered to seek the face of God in new ways reflecting 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 calls Christ), or Jesus-Sophia (as I would have it), so long as they point us toward the God who creates and redeems the world and whose Spirit fills the whole earth, this danger can be satisfactorily countered.
Let us conclude by revisiting some of our opening images with this in mind. God cries out like a woman in childbirth to bring a new world of justice to birth. With signs and wonders Holy Wisdom leads the people toward freedom; against her, evil does not prevail. A woman, imaging God the Redeemer, searches for her precious lost piece of silver. Creating, redeeming, and sanctifying are all the work of God our loving mother. A female doctor with intelligent eyes heals burns. Other images from women's experience, past and present, also come to hand: Rosa Parks sits down in the front of the bus. The divine shekinah, female spirit of God, feels the pain in her neck when a man is hanged and suffers the degradation and the violence when a woman is raped. God shines in the beauty of the waters and flowers in the fertility of the spring. A Zapatista woman shelters her babe from flying government bullets under the shadow of her wings, her outstretched arms. God smiles upon us with the eyes of a woman in love. God rages against those who harm the poor like a mother bear protecting her cubs—she tears their heart out from their chest (Hos 13:8).

The holy mystery of the living God transcends all images but can be spoken about equally well and poorly in concepts taken from male or female, and indeed cosmic, reality. Far from being silly or faddish, the approach we argue 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 enters into our God symbol, only then can the idolatrous fixation on one image of God be broken, women be empowered at our deepest core, and consequently our religious and civic communities be transformed toward greater justice. Along the way, every use of female images for God produces one more fragment of the truth of the mystery of God healing, redeeming, and liberating all human beings and the earth.

NOTES


9 Mary Kathleen Speegle Schmitt, Seasons of the Feminine Divine: Christian Feminist Prayers for the Liturgical Cycle (Cycle B), (New York: Crossroad Pub., 1993), 52; notice that in this prayer Mother refers to God, not Mary the mother of Jesus.

10 Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 37 and passim.


19 Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I, q.37, a.1.


21 Augustine, Sermo 52, c.6, n.16 (PL 38.360).


25 Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 67.


31 Ntozake Shange, for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 63. In this cry not only femaleness but blackness is endorsed as essential to this character's self-discovery: see analysis by Michelle Cliff, "I Found God in Myself and I Loved Her / I Loved Her Fiercely: More Thoughts on the Work of Black Women Artists," Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 2 (1986) 7-39.


