

REDISCOVERING THE CHRISTIAN GOD: A FEMINIST REFLECTION

"Symbol language is the mother-tongue of faith."¹ We have no way of speaking of the deepest realities in our lives except through symbols and images; these are the least inadequate of human terms. In addition, symbols that are most fitting not only attempt to express the realities they point to but in some measure partake of the realities themselves. What follows in this paper is a questioning of and renewed look at the Christian tradition of faith and its understanding of God as expressed in symbols and images. Ultimately, we are perhaps asking about models or paradigms for God (a composite of images); models that are meaningful for people today and are true to the best of human insight into Christian faith. All of this will be done from the vantage point of feminist reflection; a passing glance will also be turned on black liberation theology, especially as expressed by James Cone, for this theology also rediscovers and reinterprets the God of the Christian faith.

As a background to all that is said, it must be understood that no symbol or model can really express the reality human beings have spoken of as God. As Gregory of Nyssa wrote, "We have learned that God's nature cannot be named and is ineffable. We say that every name, whether invented by human custom or handed down by the Scriptures, is indicative of our conceptions of the divine nature, but does not signify what that nature is in itself." With this important reservation in mind, it remains nevertheless true that certain core images and symbols for God in both the Christian and the Hebrew scriptures are expressed in masculine imagery: God the Father as creator of heaven and earth; the longed for Messiah as warrior, king and judge. And within the Christian faith even the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, has mostly been spoken of as "he." Even though it is well understood today that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are the literature of a patriarchal time; indeed of a patriarchal period much wider in extent than the centuries within which these faiths came to birth, yet these core symbols are deeply anchored in the minds of people through many centuries and they have informed the language of teaching and of prayer. They are not, therefore, symbols and models which can be lightly brushed aside. In addition, within the churches and the Synagogue, ministers, priests and rabbis have all been male, as for centuries they appeared the most adequate human representatives for God. Today as the woman's movement and feminist theology challenge male dominance and reveal its oppressive character, the challenge also reaches the core symbols of faith.

What is to be done? There are some excellent examples of feminine figurative language for God in Scripture. Should these be added to the

¹G. Aulen, *The Drama and the Symbols*, trans. by S. Luiton from the Swedish published in Stockholm, 1965 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 90.

symbols and would that be sufficient? Can the symbols themselves be reinterpreted with a wider significance, as for example, the fatherhood of God representing parenthood, that is, both mother and father; and Jesus in the Christian faith representing not sonship but personhood, as Max Stackhouse suggests.² Reflection and scholarship in the above-mentioned directions are exceedingly valuable. Such discovery of feminine language and imagery, such reinterpretation of the masculine symbols must be done, as Rosemary Ruether has said, for the sake of the Gospel itself. Why? Because male dominance is a system of injustice and oppression and to use core images for God which entrench this unjust structure is ultimately idolatry. It is to make God an idol, a dominator, a tyrant, a false god. In working at the task of renewed understanding of God, reinterpretation of the core symbols and the finding of feminine symbols or figurative feminine expressions is not enough. We must instead look at the whole of the Old and New Testaments, seeking the liberating themes of Christian faith and relating them to the world of today with its anger and scepticism concerning God, with its awareness of worldwide evil and injustice, as oppressive human structures of race and sex and class become visible to all, and human beings ask "What is the meaning of the human adventure and is a loving Being at the heart of it all?"

TWO LIBERATION MOVEMENTS—THEIR LINKAGE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND IN THE TWENTIETH

Racial liberation and sexual liberation are linked together, in that the woman's movement followed on the black racial movement in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the 1830's the Grimke sisters, Angelina and Sarah, from a South Carolina slave-owning family set out to speak against slavery. As the abolitionist movement grew and came under attack, these sisters were denounced for public speaking and going beyond women's God-given place. In answering this attack, they began to speak not only for slaves but for women. Sarah said, "I ask no favors for my sex. . . . All I ask of our brethren is that they will take their feet off our necks and permit us to stand upright. . . ."³ And because women delegates to the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 were denied their places, the first Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York, was convened in 1848 by many of the women who had been at the London meeting. The women had become aware that they too needed to lay claim to freedom and human dignity.

The second movement for women's liberation beginning in the late 1960's and continuing into the present followed on the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement of the early sixties. Many young women involved in the struggle for civil rights for blacks became aware of their own second-rate status. The anti-war movement of this

²M. Stackhouse, *Ethics and the Urban Ethos* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 137.

³B. Deckard, *The Women's Movement* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

decade also heightened consciousness. Perhaps a significant difference between the movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for both blacks and women has been the growing awareness that oppression is not only personal; it is also structural and systemic. Both the informal and formal structures of society are weighted against blacks and against women.

It is because these two freedom movements are linked together in history, even when at times they have seemed opposed to each other, that I would like to touch briefly on the God question as it comes up in black theology and as it heightens our sense of the question when we turn to feminist theology.

James Cone in his book, *The God of the Oppressed*,⁴ speaks of "the black experience as a source of theology." His model can also be applied to women, looking at women's experience as a source for theology. Experience as used here has a wide ambit. It is not to be understood as sense experience alone, as immediacy prior to reflection (Lonergan). It is rather the encounter on the part of human beings with the realities of life and the world. Thought, will and emotion, reflection and action, the concrete and the spiritual are all in interchange. Experience thus understood is both personal and social; it includes and gathers up past history; it often contains a note of hope and expectation for the future.

What was the black experience of every day in the time of slavery? It was an experience of humiliation and suffering. Men and women had no rights to their own bodies, to their own work. They could not speak freely nor could they resist cruelty or punishment. They had no right to education nor to freedom of movement, to permanent marriage or family life. They were treated not as people but as things.

*I wish I knew how it would feel to be free
I wish I could break all the chains holding me.*

In this terrible experience the black people survived partly through cunning and trickery "and sheer deception in an environment of the strong and the powerful"—the story of Br'er Rabbit who tricked Br'er Fox. They survived through humor and song, both spiritual and secular. A certain human transcendence in the midst of the struggle. But yet their story is not simply about themselves. The Christian faith and the story of Jesus made talk of another reality, "so high you can't get over him, so low you can't get under him, so wide you can't get around him, and you must come in by and through the lamb."⁵ On Sunday mornings as they gathered in the black churches they understood the Gospel as about a God who was on the side of the disinherited, the outcast, the oppressed. They understood in a special way the heart of the Gospel, "Because God became man in Jesus Christ, he disclosed the divine will to be with humanity in our wretchedness." The images of God were disclosed in the person and deeds of Jesus Christ: a God who frees; a God who enters

⁴J. Cone, *The God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

⁵J. Campbell, *The Masks of God* (New York: Viking Press, 1959).

the struggle and fights together with those who suffer; a God who is on the side of the oppressed, the poor, the outcast. All these are images of God which have meaning also in feminist theology. This God who turns things around, putting down the mighty and exalting the humble, gave to the black experience a meaning—a meaning for the struggle in “this-world” and a meaning transcending history. Sometimes it is said that to speak of God as the God of the oppressed is dangerous and one-sided. Yet if we do not take sides with the poor, we take sides with the rich and have the consciousness of the rich and the powerful. There is no neutrality.

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

In relating the experience of black people in the United States to the Christian Gospel, a renewed understanding of the God revealed by and in Jesus Christ is born. This God was present, fighting with them in their struggle against injustice and against hopelessness. This God in Jesus Christ had experienced what it is to be despised and whipped and put to death among the outcast (outside the camp or the city).

What is the experience of women? This is harder to recount exactly because women, though half the human race, are isolated from one another. They do not form a people like the blacks; nor are they a class. They are found amidst all classes, races and peoples. Yet as we study the pictures of patriarchy, which has been a force throughout the world in every human culture for several thousand years, we recognize that sexism is indeed the oldest of the oppressions. So old is this oppression that it has seemed to many, nature-ordained or God-given. There have been times when women and men were more equal and worship was given to the Great Goddess or the Great Mother who was revered and honored as the creator of all life. This female deity had many names in many places: Isis in Egypt, Ishtar in Sumeria, Astarte in Syria, Demeter in Greece and Ashtoreth in the Old Testament itself. But all this was long ago and the records are mainly archeological. Nor is it clear what the status of women was under the great Goddess. She often appears as the nurturer of the God-King or Ruler-Prince who was a man.⁶

Women have experienced themselves then, mainly as the “second sex,” the “subordinate sex” whose task it is to be there for others. They have been seen, and have seen themselves as the supportive ones, the friendly helpers, the ones who served, quiet, receptive, obedient and thus keeping “the planet in orbit.” Their identity is mainly found in relation to others, as mother, as wife. As Phyllis McGinley wrote in affirming this role for women, women are “the self-immolators, the sacrificers, the givers, not the eaters-up-of-life.” Even though women may not be better off, society is if women keep to these tasks.

This can sound ennobling, setting forth a great call to sacrifice and generosity. But there is no reciprocity here. One-half of the human race is anchored to the service of the other half, encouraging thereby domina-

⁶The words are from a traditional spiritual.

tion and selfishness and accepting for themselves servitude. Many women today as they become aware of the formal and informal structures of domination that hold women in subservience reject the male symbols for a God who appears also to sanction this dominator/dominated schema. At the same time, women recognize from their own experience how important it is to nurture, to be patient, supportive, affiliative, expressive, flexible—all the “so-called feminine virtues.” It is important to be there for others, people are important, life becomes inhuman as it has in so much of the world today when love, support, care and generosity are lacking. How then to resolve the dilemma? Women’s experience has shown them that the virtues they have been conditioned in and to are exceedingly important and yet to be a servant caste, to be without identity except as making possible the identity of others, is ultimately demeaning.

If over against the experience of women, we look once more at the Gospel, at the words and deeds and life of Jesus Christ, several characteristics of witness spring to mind. He reveals his own solidarity with the oppressed, his kinship with those who are outcast and despised. He eats and drinks with them as friends. He calls women into the comradeship of his disciples, affirming their identity as equals with the men who follow him. We note, too, that Jesus abolishes a master/slave or master/servant relationship and, therefore, a deliverance from all oppression—a communication of equals. He stresses that all who would follow him are called to servanthood, in the sense of serving each other. “You must not be called Teacher because you are all brothers [and sisters] of one another and have only one Teacher . . . the one Father in Heaven . . . The greatest one among you must be your servant” (Mt 23:8ff). We note, too, that this Jesus respects the rights and the identity of each one who comes to him, whether friend or enemy. He does not do this for the sake of popularity, for he goes his way in consistency and it says he is no false respecter of persons, for he knew what was in human beings. He was not naively loving or sentimentally caring. And yet he speaks of the importance of forgiveness, not only seven times, but seventy times seven.

As we look at this Jesus, who was put to death because the powerful hated this challenge to all repression and this openness to life, we ask how such constancy, such genuine care without any sentimentality is possible. If we take Jesus’ way of being and doing earnestly, we are pushed to the question of God. We are asked to decide like the Pharisees as to whether or not it is God’s power that is at work in Jesus (Luke 11:15-20). Jesus does not give a description of God, but by his own way of being he reveals the kind of God that God is. Who is this God that Jesus reveals? And how does this God relate to women’s experience as they become aware of their oppression, while at the same time, they are aware of the importance of the “so-called feminine virtues.” This God is one who has come near, identifying with the least of human beings and, therefore, calling all into friendship. For this God each human being is of value, for the Sabbath is made for man/woman; the person is not made for the Sabbath. Persons are more important than law, than cult. This

God is no despot; truly to serve this God is to serve each other. This God is one who empowers and does not dominate. This God as revealed in Jesus enters into the struggle against evil, the evil in the human heart, the evil in human structures, the overarching weight of evil carried through the centuries in human cultures and civilizations. This God has sent the Spirit, empowering men and women today to break open the fetters of history for the fullness of human personhood, the fullness of humanity. Ultimately this God is the God of the living and the dead, of "this-world and the next" so that all those who have died without fulfillment may not be without meaning. This God is revealed to us as the one God who is at the same time a community of persons, the God who is a society and who calls all human beings into comradeship with one another and with that Trinity.

What relation has all this to women's experience? Jean Baker-Miller in her recent book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, writes, "Practically everyone now bemoans Western man's sense of alienation, lack of community, an inability to find ways of organizing society for human ends. We have reached the end of the road that is built on the set of traits held out for male identity—advance at any cost, pay any price, drive out all competitors, and kill them if necessary."⁷ We must return to a basis of faith in affiliation—and not only faith but recognition that it is a requirement for the existence of human beings.

"A most basic social advance can emerge though women's outlook, through women putting forward women's concerns (women's concerns as important for both men and women). Here again it is not a question of innate biological characteristics." She draws attention also to the fact that "it is a question of the kind of psychological structuring that is encompassed differentially by each sex at this time in our development as a society of human beings."⁸ Affiliation (ties to others) is one such strength that women have developed but the only affiliations available to women have been subservient ones. Yet ties to others that are an empowering of others even as we are true to ourselves are desperately needed today. Not only this but a sense of people, an acknowledgement of need and vulnerability, a passivity that is a listening and therefore an activity. An acceptance of power and the reclaiming of conflict—that by conflict we grow but not by hatred. All these qualities are set forth in Jesus Christ; their ensemble is what we call his true humanity. But Jesus said, "he who sees me sees the Father," and therefore, these qualities without imperfection or limitation are in the God that Jesus reveals.

One last question remains. European theology, spurred by the criticism of the Enlightenment, has been sceptical of God's reality. One particular problem that has counted against belief in God has been the power of evil in the world. Latin American theology has not been so directly concerned with the sceptical non-believer, but has asked about

⁷J. Baker-Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976).

⁸*Ibid.*

religious faith in its relation to the non-person, that is, all the multitudes of the earth who are wretched, disinherited and ignored. As we look into this second question, it is ultimately concerned about the evil in the world, the question of oppression and domination. The domination of the rich over the poor, of the white over the colored peoples, of men over women. This has been the story of centuries. Can we believe in God at all when so many who have followed this God have used God's image to bolster oppression? Rosemary Ruether has recently written that perhaps the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition (as we have been taught about him) is more part of the problem than part of the solution.⁹ There is much truth in this. Yet if we think of the experience of strength given and love sensed by the blacks in the midst of slavery, together with the hope promised, and if we think of all that women have learned concerning service, cooperation, affiliation, nurturing and love for people, despite their oppression, we recognize that experience of love has existed in our world, despite the often overwhelming power of evil and domination. All this is but a foretaste. The revolutionary and forward thrust of the Gospel and of the God revealed to us must move us forward to break the fetters of history, so that the promise may be seen more clearly. Yet, while things remain hidden and we see but in a glass darkly, what we see as a sign of future promise impels us to the task of justice here and now. God precedes, accompanies and beckons us forward in the struggle.

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⁹R. Ruether, *The Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).