

# Feminine Language About God?

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It is a peculiarity of ancient Israel that its faith obliged the people to worship only one God. Therefore, the Old Testament language about God differs in many ways from that of surrounding nations. While it was a common feature in ancient cultures to conceive of the divine reality as male or female in analogy to human society, the one God of Israel could not be understood to have a divine consort lest monotheism be lost. As a consequence, the God of Israel could not be a male person in the strict sense, because that would imply sexual correlation with a female consort. There are some examples, most notably in the prophecy of Hosea, where the people of Israel function in the role of the bride of Yahweh. It is in these cases where the biblical language about God comes closest to attributing to God a male role in the sexual sense. Otherwise, even where God is talked about as a quasi male person, the point of comparison is the social rather than the sexual role, that is, connected with being the head of a clan. It comes to expression most characteristically in the father-son relationship, when God is said to relate to the king like a father relates to his son. Later on, the application of the image could be expanded to include the whole people of Israel in terms of sons or daughters of God. It expresses not the natural relationship of procreation, but rather the social function of providence and care, as it is appropriate in the head of the family.

In a similar way, Jesus talked about the fatherhood of God as God cares for all creatures and provides for them (Matt. 5:45). Like the head of an archaic family, God is in complete control of his people (Matt. 6:4) and is ready to forgive their

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faults. In turn, they are required to unequivocally obey him.

In this way, the Lord's Prayer addresses God as "Father," and correspondingly Jesus himself relates to God as an obedient son. There was no sexual connotation involved. Even in the story of Jesus' baptism in the Gospel of Luke, where Psalm 2:7 is quoted ("You are my son, today I have begotten you" [Luke 3:22]), we have a formula of adoption or solemn recognition rather than a statement on physical procreation. It was somewhat unfortunate, therefore, that later on the trinitarian doctrine of the church chose precisely the image of generation to identify the distinctive character of the father-son relationship in the Trinity. Of course, the church fathers did not mean to say that the son was brought forth by a physical act of begetting, but the connotation was there when this image was selected and isolated from other ways of describing the father-son relationship that occur in the New Testament.

It may be stated, then, that the biblical language about God avoids sexual connotations, and necessarily so; because such avoidance was required in order to protect biblical monotheism. The conception of God as *father* does not have sexual, but social implications, and so does the use of the word *son*. Although in popular Christian piety there always has been a tendency of imagining God the Father as an old man, the intention was generally not to say that God was male. To introduce such a sexual element into the idea of God was to abandon the orthodox Christian faith in the one God.

It was left to the modern feminist movement to reintroduce the element of sexuality into the language about God. Contrary to tradition, the sexual connotation of the words *father* and *son* have been highlighted, as if they expressed a specifically male conception of the divine reality. If that were granted, it would be plausible consequently to ask for a better balance in the gender aspect of our language about God.

It is an imprudent proposal, nevertheless. It not only disregards the fact that the biblical language about God the Father dwells upon social rather than sexual connotations, but it also risks the surrender of the monotheistic emphasis of the biblical tradition. In addition, the proposal seems to operate on the assumption that religious language, in general, mirrors the social experience of human persons; that a change toward equality in the social status of women must be reflected in religious talk about God or even preceded by a change in religious language in order to remove obstacles that may prevent the genuine acceptance of the new status of women in the society. Whoever stresses this argument should be aware, however, of employing a Feuerbachian type of conceiving of religious language; as if such language would essentially consist of projecting the prevailing human and social experience of a period into our images of the divine reality, so that a change in social conditions would require a corresponding change in religious language. This assumption endangers the truth claims of religious language by reducing it to human projection. While it is undeniable that the social climate of patriarchy conditioned the choice of the word *father* in characterizing the divine functions of government, providence and paternal care, this fact belongs to the contingencies of God's revelation in history. It is conceivable that, in a matriarchal society, the word *mother* could have served a similar purpose. But in fact the word *father* came to be used in this way. That is part of the con-

tingencies of historical revelation, just as the fact that the Son of God became incarnate as a Jew rather than a Chinese or German. As the Nazi Germans were bothered by Jesus' Jewishness, so are our contemporary feminists bothered by the contingency of language about God as father. It is a new form of the old scandal of historical particularity that is the burden of the Christian faith in God's incarnation in history. As we have to accept other contingencies of that historical incarnation, we have to realize that the word *father* in Jesus' own language functioned not as an exchangeable image, but as the name he used in addressing the God he proclaimed. Therefore, in the Christian church the name father, and its use as Jesus used it, belongs to the identity of the Christian faith. It cannot be changed without abandoning that identity, because it is by entering into Jesus' relationship to God as father that we share in his sonship and—because of our communion with him—obtain the hope of eternal life.

Finally, the discussion is not without its humorous notes. At some occasion a participant of a discussion seriously claimed that women would be marginalized by a religion that worships God as father, since women could not relate to God by such a male image. Obviously, it did not occur to the questioner that—even if God were conceived as male—it would be not so extraordinary that a woman should relate to a male person. Easier perhaps than to a female authority. The relationship of daughters to their fathers is often less complicated than that between sons and fathers. On the other hand, if they could choose the gender of their God, men might be inclined to adore God in the image of a beautiful woman rather than a father. And a female goddess might be prejudiced in favor of her sons, as it sometimes happens with human mothers. For better or for worse, the Christian faith does not provide such a choice.

