

- 45 *Ibid.*
46 *Further Shore*, p. 39.
47 Chuang-tzu says: "The baby looks at things all day without squinting and staring; this is because his eyes are not focused on any particular object. He goes without knowing where he is going, and stops without knowing what he is doing. he merges himself with the surroundings and goes along with them". *Chuang-tzu*, 23.
48 Julian of Norwich. *Showings*, The Thirteenth Revelation, the twenty-seventh chapter. In the Paulist Press version (*Classics of Western Spirituality*), p. 225.

God as Mother: a necessary debate

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The report recently published by a study group for the Church of Scotland¹ on the Motherhood of God for discussion at the Church's General Assembly caused quite a stir in the popular press, and this reaction, no doubt, had a part to play in setting the atmosphere for the reception of the report at the Assembly itself. However, that there should be such a reaction would seem to reflect the patriarchal nature of the society we live in rather than a resurgence of religious fervour, since I would doubt that the feelings of horror and ridicule expressed came in each case from a devout church-goer.

Despite the trivialisation of the report by the popular press and its subsequent dismissal by the General Assembly, this reaction as a whole should be welcomed by theologians and believers alike, and those who produced the report should not be upset by it, because confrontation and controversy are at the heart of the Christian gospel and the tradition of the Church. From the beginning the preaching of the gospel encountered intransigence and resistance to change. St. Paul himself expressed anguish at the seemingly impossible task of preaching the concept of a crucified God, 'the scandal of the cross', which he describes as, 'a stumbling block to Jews and folly to gentiles' (I Cor. 1:23). But without that leap into new territory the Christian message would have died with the first apostles. This does not mean that the Church must change for change's sake, but only that it is through confrontation with new concepts that we are forced to study and reflect on our present position. If that position is found to be irrelevant or alienating then change should take place.

Thus attention paid to the subject of the Motherhood of God by the media tells us that the mood of this debate, in the true tradition of Christian theology, would be controversial and divisive. The Church

must not back away from divisive debate simply on the grounds that it is divisive. If it had done so in the past then we would have neither creed nor Church today.

The publication of the report on the Motherhood of God caused the first substantial reaction to feminist theology in Britain, where it is still in its infancy compared with its growth in the U.S. Although it is true that, for example, Margaret Hebblethwaite's book on God's involvement in the human task of motherhood,² and the female crucifix by Edwina Sandys displayed in New York's Episcopal cathedral, did receive recent attention by the press, it was this report which was the greatest test of public opinion since it was to be presented to the governing body of one of the country's most respected Churches, and its acceptance would have heralded a new dimension to Christian witness and worship in that Church. Britain's churches would have begun to take account of a movement which voices the discontent and alienation felt by many of the gender which makes up the majority of those who occupy their pews.

However, in the event, a report which took two years to prepare was discarded in only an hour of the General Assembly's time. The question why a subject which occupied so much time for those that prepared it, who included in their number the panel on Doctrine for the Church of Scotland, should be written off (or, to use the parlance of the Assembly, 'departed from') in so short a time begs to be answered. The answer may lie in the publicity that surrounded the initial publication of the report prior to its hearing in the Assembly. That publicity, in the main, trivialised the report and furthermore misrepresented it by presenting its contents as a discussion of the gender of God and its conclusion as a replacement of the male God with the female Goddess. The media reaction displayed the same misunderstanding that was expressed by the Women's Guild of the Church of Scotland, the same body which initially mandated the report two years ago.

The extremely hostile reaction shown by many women to the report may have surprised some people, since the concept of the Motherhood of God was intended primarily, though not exclusively, for women who experienced alienation through the total use of male imagery by the Churches. But this same hostility displayed by women is frequently directed to other ideals of feminism which are seen to challenge the traditional role of women in society. It is a fact understood by feminists that a male-dominated society could only ever function with the cooperation and compliance of the majority of women. The Church, a traditional bastion of male authority, reflects this situation to an extreme degree since women, who form the majority of its communicant members, have allowed that male dominance to continue through their acquiescence. If women

wholeheartedly withdrew their support from the Church then that situation would have to change. But they do not. The Church continues, as it has done for centuries, with men in full control of the reins of power and women producing the children for them to baptise and happily cleaning the silver and arranging the flowers. Those same women balk at any suggestion that change should occur, be it in the sanctuary or in the language that is used to address the Godhead. The women who do feel alienated and discriminated against by the Church are regarded by their 'sisters' as fanatical extremists who threaten the roles that have been dictated to them by men.

Thus the report that seemed at first glance to announce that God, in whom is reflected the masculine hierarchy, was not a man, was greeted with panic and almost instant rejection. With the publication of this report would seem to come a concept that cuts away at the last support of the superstructure of the man's world, created and organised by the male-God. But the Motherhood of God is not about the gender of God. This is a point that is clearly stated in the report, for it is incorrect to 'genderise' God since gender belongs to the finite world of creatures. Our language can never describe the Divine adequately, and we can only use our human images as pointers which hint at God's nature. Hence the term 'father' was never intended to express the gender of God, but only to reflect the relationship between God and the believer. Likewise, if we are to adopt the title 'mother' for God it does not mean that the Creator has undergone a sex-change; rather, the image of the Motherhood is being introduced simply as a means to reflect elements in God's nature which are not made apparent with the image of Fatherhood. These elements appear in the Bible in both Old and New Testaments and are clearly and lucidly discussed in the report.

God is neither male nor female but both. Karl Barth in his comments on the statement concerning the creation of mankind in Gen. 1: 27 ('So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them'), lays stress on the fact that male and female make up the image of God in the created world:

In all his future utterances and actions God will acknowledge that He has created man male and female, and in this way in His own image and likeness.³

Thus the nature of God can be understood as being made up of both male and female. This concept of the male and female nature of God is also apparent in each individual human being, since each of us possesses in our nature, despite our gender, elements of the masculine and the feminine. Our Prime Minister is a splendid example to illustrate this point. When we hear people say, 'She's the only man in the Cabinet', we know that behind that remark lies no question ing of

the gender of the Prime Minister, nor indeed her Cabinet; but rather, it is simply a statement about her nature. Each of us reveals in our nature traits of the masculine and the feminine, imaging the God who embodies the two. In this sense we are each a microcosm of the Creator.

To go the whole way and reject totally the Fatherhood of God in favour of the Motherhood would be to repeat the same mistake. Rosemary Radford Ruether makes this point in commenting on 'Pagan Feminism':

Now the great Goddess is the predominant image of the Divine. Woman then becomes the one who fully images the Goddess and communicates directly with her. Males are either excluded or given a subordinate position traditionally accorded women in the patriarchal cult. This coup d'état may feel satisfying in the short run, but in the long run would seem to reproduce the same fundamental pathology.⁴

However, this tendency displayed by some radical feminist theologians to turn their backs on the Judeo-Christian tradition and with it the Fatherhood of God is understandable in the light of centuries of alienation brought about by our patriarchal Church.

The language we use to address God is inevitably a reflection of our limited human experience, and in this sense the title 'father' for God, albeit idealised, takes with it human presuppositions. Although theologically this title was never intended to reflect the gender of God, our human experience leads us to the intimation that God is masculine. It would seem that the solution to the problem of 'genderising' the Divine, and thereby imposing a limitation on God, would be to use neither male nor female language of gender exclusively. Instead of arguing for a theology of the Motherhood of God or the Fatherhood of God we should be thinking in terms of the Parenthood of God, where the ideals of either image, in the experience of the individual, can act as a valid focus for faith. With the introduction of both images would come a clearer understanding of the nature of God, that the Divine is neither male nor female, and that it is male and female together that reflect the image of God.

Maybe the time will come when the Church Universal will represent in its clergy, as well as in its pews, the masculine and feminine nature of God, and maybe then we can begin to accept, without any fear, the Parenthood of God as a whole.

1 *The Motherhood of God*, Alan E. Lewis (Ed.) Edinburgh, 1984.

2 *Motherhood of God*, London, 1984

3 *Church Dogmatics*, English Translation, Edinburgh, 1958, Vol. 3, part 1, p.187.

4 'The Female Nature of God', *Concilium*, *God as Father?*, Edinburgh, 1981, pp. 64-5.