

## Feminism and God's Phallus<sup>1</sup>

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Feminism is a collection of movements which “recognize the historical and contemporary denigration, subordination, and exclusion of women in culture, society and its institutions, including the family and the churches.” Its mission is to promote female “freedom, participation, and well-being” in the midst of these institutions. One of feminism’s tools is Feminist Theology, a form of critical Liberation Theology which seeks to address women’s issues in the “texts, rituals, and practices of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”<sup>2</sup>

Feminist Theology is critical of what it sees as a threefold ideology about women which manifests itself in Christian thought and practice. Throughout the Bible, the church Fathers, and even modern theologians, one finds that commonly:

- 1) Women are seen as property, objects, or tools
- 2) Women are viewed as polluting – dangerously sexual or carnal
- 3) Women are romantically idealized as morally and spiritually superior to men but childlike and in need of protection in the private realm.<sup>3</sup>

The theology underlying this ideology is said to be that fact that God is almost

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<sup>1</sup>This essay is in response to case study # 4.7 in Alister E. McGrath’s *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>2</sup>Anne Carr, “Feminist Theology,” *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*. Alister E. McGrath, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 220.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

always portrayed as male, and “in so far as Christianity envisions God as a male in heaven it makes the male superior to women on earth.” The classical picture of God as a male “dominator” extends then into human relationships, creating the three ideologies cited above.<sup>4</sup>

“The biblical and popular image of God as a great patriarch in heaven, rewarding and punishing according to his mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will, has dominated the imagination of millions over thousands of years,” says Mary Daly. And this symbol of the Father has served to legitimize the social structures whereby men dominate women. “If God in ‘his’ heaven is a father ruling ‘his’ people, then it is in the ‘nature’ of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, “if God is male, then the male is God.”<sup>6</sup>

Although there are many facets to feminist theology, this essay will focus on the question of God’s apparent maleness and its ramifications.

Christian theologians have always argued that God is not really male or female. Yes, God is spoken of in the Bible using grammatically masculine terms and pronouns. And yes, God is envisioned metaphorically as a king, father, and husband. But, in God’s divine essence, God is beyond male and female. Nevertheless, a Feminist Theologian might reply that

In spite of theological denials of sexuality (or any materiality) in God, the persistent use of masculine pronouns for God and the reaction of many Christians against reference to God as ‘she’ would appear to affirm the

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 222.

<sup>5</sup>Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 13.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 19. “The divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination.” Thus, God must be “castrated” by “cutting away the Supreme Phallus” in the collective imagination.

'maleness' attributed to God.<sup>7</sup>

Embedded in our language and in popular imagination is the picture of a male Deity, reinforced by the existence of a male Christ. This androcentrism in religion is said to make women feel like outsiders, and to sabotage their emotional connection to the divine. Mary Daly argues that whenever one-sex symbolism for God is used, the effect is to legitimize "the existing social, economic, and political status quo, in which women and other victimized groups are subordinate."<sup>8</sup>

Consider the following passage, in which a male theologian waxes on the inclusiveness of God:

To believe that God is Father is to become aware of oneself not as a stranger, not as an outsider or an alienated person, but as a son who belongs or a person appointed to a marvelous destiny, which he shares with the whole community. To believe that God is Father means to be able to say "we" in regard to all men.

To this passage, Daly responds: "A woman whose consciousness has been aroused can say that such language makes her aware of herself as a stranger, as an outsider, as an alienated person, not as a daughter who belongs..."<sup>9</sup> To her, the language of "son" and "father" is inherently exclusive. The language itself creates an impenetrable psychic barrier, for no woman can fully visualize herself as a "son," or feel like she is made in the image of the male "father."

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<sup>7</sup>Carr 223.

<sup>8</sup>Daly 19. Cf. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus (and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 238-242, where he wrestles with how "a male image of God validates male experience at the expense of women... by deifying masculinity."

<sup>9</sup>Daly, 20. Her quotation is from Gregory Baum, *Man Becoming* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 195.

Consider the reaction of Reform Rabbi Rebecca Alpert after using for the first time a feminist siddur (Jewish prayerbook) which described God in purely feminine imagery. “It transformed my relationship with God,” she says,

For the first time, I understood what it meant to be made in God’s image. To think of God as a woman like myself, to see Her as both powerful and nurturing, to see Her imaged with a woman’s body, with womb, with breasts – this was an experience of ultimate significance. Was this the relationship that men have had with God for all these millennia? How wonderful to gain access to those feelings and perceptions.<sup>10</sup>

One is reminded of the visions of Julian of Norwich, who comprehended God as both Father and Mother. She often described Christ as “our mother,” the one who feeds the church through the Eucharist like a mother suckling her child.<sup>11</sup>

One way that feminists have dealt with God’s apparent biblical maleness is by stressing those passages which describe God using female or feminine imagery. Several passages compare God’s activity to the biological activities of a mother, such as giving birth (Isa. 42:14; 46:3-4; Deut. 32:18) and suckling (Num. 11:12; Isa 49:14-15; 66:12-13).<sup>12</sup> Other metaphors draw on women’s cultural activity, such as God as a seamstress (Neh. 9:21) or midwife (Ps. 22:9-10; 71:6; Isa. 66:9). In the parables, God is compared to a woman working leaven into bread (Lk. 13:18-21) or a woman seeking

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<sup>10</sup>Qtd. in “God and Gender,” *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God\\_and\\_gender](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_and_gender): 2. *Wikipedia* articles are community constructions and thus are not attributable to a single author.

<sup>11</sup>See “Julian of Norwich’s Quotations: ‘God our Mother,’” <http://www.gloriana.nu/mother.htm>, containing excerpts from M. L. Del Mastro (translator), *Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

<sup>12</sup>Margo Houts adds these other “motherly” passages: Ps. 131:2; Job 38:8, 29; Prov. 8:22-25; 1 Pet. 2:2-3; Acts 17:28 – “Feminine Images for God: What Does the Bible Say?” [Http://clubs.calvin.edu/chimes/970418/o1041897.htm](http://clubs.calvin.edu/chimes/970418/o1041897.htm): 2.

a lost coin (Lk. 15:8-10).

Some would add to this list passages which incorporate female bird imagery for God (Ps. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 91:1, 4; Isa. 31:5; Deut. 32:11-12). The Lord is also a (violent) mother bear in Hosea 13:8.

According to Houts, the presence of these feminine images of divine self-disclosure means that “God inspired the biblical authors to be inclusive,” so we should be inclusive too.<sup>13</sup> It seems, though, that Dr. Houts is investing too much theological capital into this relatively short list of passages. Although all God-language is analogical, these motherly images are quite self-consciously metaphorical. All it proves is that it is appropriate to sometimes speak of God in metaphorical female terms. These passages say nothing of inclusiveness, nor do they reflect the actual gender of God. Hayter finds that there is

little illumination on the subject of sexuality in God to be gained from this approach. It simply illustrates the folly of trying to attribute femininity – or indeed masculinity – to Yahweh on the basis of the gender of words and imagery used in the Bible.<sup>14</sup>

The same can be said for those who focus on the grammatical forms of words. Though God is most often described with words of masculine gender, other terms associated with God (such as “righteousness,” “spirit,” “wisdom,” “Shekinah,” and “Torah”) are grammatically feminine. But this provides no information regarding divine sexuality.

Although “the grammatical form of words has no biological or literal

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 3.

<sup>14</sup>Mary Hayter, *New Eve in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 23

significance”<sup>15</sup> (especially in languages like Greek and Hebrew where all nouns have a gender), gendered pronouns *do* have psychological significance, according to feminist writers.

Several alternatives to using all-masculine pronouns to describe God have been proposed. For example, the author “The Gender of God” for deism.org always uses “It” in reference to God. This is, he says, because gender is defined by body parts, hormones, a differently wired brain, the ‘Y’ chromosome, and being raised to behave “like a man.” A “manly god” is thus “unlikely” because “gender identification is completely and inherently linked to having a physical body.”<sup>16</sup>

Feminist writers, though, have avoided using “It” because in English the neuter pronoun denotes something that is impersonal.<sup>17</sup> This is fine for a Deist, but not for a Christian.<sup>18</sup>

Another approach is to alternate between “he” and “she” in passages speaking of God. Carr argues that it is logical that “she” is as appropriate as “he” to describe a sexless deity. Furthermore, using the feminine pronoun is “necessary to reorient Christian imagination from the idolatrous implications of exclusively masculine God-language and the... father image.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the *Wikipedia* author rejects alternating pronouns because it gives the appearance of dualism or goddess worship.<sup>20</sup>

Along similar lines, feminist theologian R. R. Ruether has suggested the

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<sup>15</sup>*Wikipedia*, 7.

<sup>16</sup>[Http://www.deism.org/gender.htm](http://www.deism.org/gender.htm).

<sup>17</sup>*Wikipedia*, 5.

<sup>18</sup>The *Wikipedia* author, however, argues that those who view God as an Aristotelian “prime mover” or as a Platonic impersonal amorphous deity (such as many Medieval philosophers) *should* use “It” to accurately describe their perception of God.

<sup>19</sup>Carr, 223.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid*, 6.

designation “God/ess” to venerate a deity who combines in a single being the characteristics of maleness and femaleness.<sup>21</sup> Some similarly describe God as “Father-Mother.” Mary Hayter rejects this approach as being at odds with the biblical portrayal of God. She argues that understanding the gender of God in any literal sense amounts to verbal idolatry.<sup>22</sup> To her, the preponderance of the Bible’s male over female imagery for God “has no significance as an insight into the subject of the sexuality of God.” Scripture’s (metaphorical) male imagery was used to emphasize God’s personhood. “The so-called inclusive term ‘Mother-Father God,’ as an unqualified address, actually encourages the misbegotten attribution of sexuality to God rather than abolishing it.”<sup>23</sup> Those who espouse a male/female God/ess, as well as those who assume that God is exclusively male should remember that “*any* attribution of sexuality to God is a reversion to Paganism.”<sup>24</sup>

The masculine terminology does not denote a male deity; the feminine terminology does not denote a female deity; nor does the mixture of masculine and feminine terminology denote an androgynous God/ess. Rather, the indications are that the God of the Bible uniquely incorporates and transcends all sexuality.<sup>25</sup>

Another Feminist strategy for dealing with to male pronouns for Deity in translations and prayers is to simply avoid third-person pronouns. One approach is to

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<sup>21</sup>Hayter, 12, 21, 37, 41. Cf. Carr, 223.

<sup>22</sup>Hayter, 33.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. She also suggests that the divine plural *elohim* can be understood as inclusive of all potential aspects of divinity, incorporating and transcending them all, including masculinity and femininity (91).

convert them all to the second-person pronoun “You.” Or, “he,” “his,” and “himself” can be replaced by “God,” “God’s,” and “Godself.”<sup>26</sup>

To the woman who feels oppressed by God’s “maleness,” these changes can be liberating and revelatory. Acknowledging God’s female side thus has a ministerial dimension beyond the semantic battles of philosophers and theologians. Can anything which helps women feel closer to God really be all bad? There is a danger in attributing sexuality to God. And yet, in the human imagination God almost always takes an anthropomorphic form. The popularity of icons attests to humanity’s psychological need to (at least hypothetically) see and touch God in order to feel close to him.

The vast majority of God-imagery in the Bible is male. Is it wrong, then, for a woman to picture her Lord in the form of a woman like herself? I would suggest that this is a discipleship issue. If the male image of God poses a stumbling block to a woman’s faith, then by all means she should be free to re-envision that deity. God in her mercy will understand. But an effort should be made to re-capture the image of God the Father, Husband, and King, but without the negative connotations. Mary Daly, quoted above, seems able to only imagine God as a harsh, brutal Father and a tyrannical, oppressive King. Christianity’s job, in the face of feminism, is to re-capture the biblical concept of God as a loving, compassionate, nurturing Father-King. We don’t need to purge maleness from the theological vocabulary; we need to re-envision what maleness means. Ministers and teachers should take pains to show the sensitivity and tenderness of God as well as his sovereignty and authority. Today’s women are becoming more aware of feminist criticisms. The church must speak of God in terms that do not alienate women who are sensitive to these gender issues.

The other lesson the church must learn from feminism is that men must behave in a way that does not tarnish masculinity. Perhaps Feminist Theologians find God the

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<sup>26</sup>*Wikipedia*, 6. The author notes various translations and prayerbooks which use these alternative pronouns.

Father hateful because the only men they know are hateful as well. It would behoove the church to remind men that in their daily lives they are imaging God. Men must work to be the kind of father, husband, friend, and boss that God would be. Men must walk in the divine image of grace, mercy, and love. The existence of Feminist Theology is a testament to our failure to do just that.

One issue not addressed so far in this paper is Christology, which Anne Carr says is “the doctrine most used against women.” This is so because the historically indisputable maleness of Jesus<sup>27</sup> “has been assumed throughout Christian History to reveal the maleness of God.”<sup>28</sup> But as we have already noted, theologians have always recognized that God is not literally male as Christ was. Instead, Christ’s maleness reflects some of the same qualities in the Father which cause the prophets to speak of him in male terms. Christ’s maleness, like God’s, is a tender, self-sacrificing masculinity. It is a masculinity that voluntarily expresses itself through humility and service, a masculinity which is in no way oppressive to women who understand it. If, in fact, “the maleness of Jesus has been interpreted to mean that the norm of humanity is the male and that the male human being is closer to the ideal than the female,”<sup>29</sup> then this is an unwarranted and oppressive interpretation.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>For more on the sexuality of Christ, its interpretations, and implications, see Bjorn Korondorfer’s *Mens’ Bodies, Men’s Gods* (New York: NYU Press, 1996). Cf. also Leo Steinberg’s *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). This book deals with the fact that, in Renaissance artworks, attention is often drawn to the genitalia of Christ in his infancy and death/resurrection. Is this *ostentatio genitalium* meant to emphasize Christ’s humanity, his maleness, or his circumcision as the first blood of the Passion?

<sup>28</sup>Carr, 225.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Feminist Theologians have done Christianity a service by exposing the folly of this argument. Daly (79) shows the inconsistency in excluding women from ministry because Jesus was male:

the ‘particularity’ of Jesus’ maleness has not functioned in the same way as the ‘particularity’ of his Semitic identity or of his youth. Non-Semites or persons over, say, thirty-three, have not been universally excluded from the priesthood on the basis that they did not belong to the same ethnic group or age group as Jesus.

Feminists are correct to notice Christ's "radically inclusive ministry" and point to the "gender-inclusive" rite of baptism.<sup>31</sup> There is no need to re-envision Christ as being androgynous, or as a female divine Spirit of Wisdom incarnated in a male body.<sup>32</sup> Christ's life and teaching speak against all forms of oppression everywhere.<sup>33</sup>

## Appendix: On God's Body

One theological concept which intersects with Feminist Theology in interesting ways is the question of whether God has a body. The "Classical" Christian concept of God focuses more on God's being apophatically unlike us in his sheer limitlessness. It seems, though, that those with postmodern minds are beginning to balk at this Platonic-Aristotelian cosmic presence in favor of a more palpable, approachable, and sympathetic Creator.

It seems that something special was lost when the anthropomorphic Hebrew Yahweh was replaced in early Christianity by the Wholly Other. In his article on "Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity," David Paulsen tells the story of a fourth-century Egyptian monk named Abba Sarapion, who pictured God in human form as he prayed. After all, was not man made in God's image? Later the deacon Photinus came from Cappadocia and explained to Serapion and his brethren that the *imago dei* was to be interpreted "spiritually" only. They were wrong to form a mental picture of God in the shape of a man.

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<sup>31</sup>Carr, 225.

<sup>32</sup>See Jack Cottrell's strongly anti-feminist article, "The Gender of Jesus and the Incarnation," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 3 (Fall 2000): 175-177, 185-191.

<sup>33</sup>Michael Clark, "Gender and God," [http://www.ncf.carleton.ca/~dy656/earthpages/articles\\_gender\\_deity.html](http://www.ncf.carleton.ca/~dy656/earthpages/articles_gender_deity.html): 2.

Yet [Sarapion] felt devastated, when “the anthropomorphic image of the Godhead, which he used to set before him in prayer, was removed from his heart.” In great despair, prostrating himself to the ground and weeping, he cried out, “they have taken my God from me, and I have now none to behold, and whom to worship and address I know not”<sup>34</sup>

As we postmoderns leave behind the modern exaltation of the intellect and seek to fulfill the yearnings of our hearts, an embodied God can comfort us greater than a divine hypertranscendent emotionless energy field.

Eilberg-Schwartz reiterates this thought:

A father God who has no body, or one who turns his back so that we cannot see his face, is not a father with whom some of us find it possible to be intimate... I need to imagine God with a body, with fatherly arms, who does not turn his back away.<sup>35</sup>

In one sense, the question of God’s corporeality is moot, since human minds have and will envision God in a body whether he has one or not. There seems to exist a tension between the incorporeal God which seems intellectually unavoidable and the anthropomorphic Deity we perceive with our hearts.

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<sup>34</sup>David L. Paulsen, “Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: “Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses,” *Harvard Theological Review* 83:2 (1990): 105-116. Cf. Paulsen’s expansion of this subject with Carl Griffin: “Augustine and the Corporeality of God” *HTR* 95:1 (2002): 97-98. Paulsen, incidentally is a Mormon and professor at Brigham Young University. The corporeality of God is a feature of Mormon theology. See Francis Beckwith, “Mormon Theism, the Traditional Christian Concept of God, and Greek Philosophy: A Critical Analysis,” *JETS* 44:4 (Dec. 2001): 671-695.

<sup>35</sup>*God’s Phallus* 238-239. The thesis of this book is that monotheism implies a degree of homoerotic tension between the male God and the men who worship him. It was this anatomical discomfort that led Judaism and Christianity toward a Platonic disembodied (distant, authoritarian) conception of the Deity. The author wishes to recover the image of an embodied fatherly (but not necessarily masculine) God. He argues that a sexless God leads to asceticism (199).

Perhaps one solution is to think about the balance struck between the transcendent incorporeal Father God and the warm human body of Jesus Christ. Together, God and Christ form a balance between the immanent and the transcendent, between the embodied and the incorporeal. To ascribe more immanence and embodiment to the father is to upset the trinitarian balance among the Father who is out there, the Spirit who is among us, and the Son who is the mediator – divine and human, clothed in incorruptible flesh.

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