

Feminine Face of God

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The gender of God attracts attention and has relevance only in an anthropological context. We, sexual beings, cannot imagine or want God to remain asexual, hence the conflict. Prof. Isaac Arickappalil skilfully brings to our attention the social, cultural, and political contexts in which the Sacred Scriptures were written and the necessity of proper exegetical study to understand and appreciate meanings they aspire to convey. Moreover, along with the change in milieu the Sacred Scriptures demand reconstruction and retelling so that the letters may not asphyxiate and exterminate the spirit that they enclose and try to communicate. He also proposes the possibility of advancing a feminine pneumatology which hitherto remains untapped especially in the Western theological circle. – Editor

Introduction

With the interest in Feminist theology there is a greater urge to discover the feminine aspect in God. The protagonists of feminist theology believe that a feminine God or feminine elements in God can eliminate male supremacy and gender discrimination in all spheres of life and also in language about God who is beyond all human definitions and limitations including sexuality and gender. Theology is a reflection on the word of God revealed in the Bible and tradition in a historic milieu and ever revealing in the world through its changing social, cultural, political situations. The feminine theologians also have recourse to the Scripture to substantiate their arguments in unfolding the feminine face of God and they begin their reflections with the first book of the Bible. To base and solidify their claims they pick up Genesis 1: 27, "So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." This anthropological statement that both men and women are created in the image of God implies that both in man and woman there is an image of God which would conversely affect the imagery of God as well. Logically in God, therefore, must exist both male and female characteristics, masculine and feminine elements, though in a transcendent way. Commenting on this biblical verse Congar observes, "If this is true, then there must be in God, in a transcendent form, something that corresponds to masculinity and something that corresponds to femininity"¹. Here in this brief article we are trying to examine the feminine elements in the notion of God from a Christian perspective as depicted in the Bible and discussed in

the theological circles. The feminine image or characteristics are seen in each person of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Nonetheless in the third person, Holy Spirit the feminine dimension is prominently explicit. Until recently in the Western Christianity, unlike in the Eastern churches, there has been a lack of properly developed Pneumatology which has been substituted by Mariology.² We may conclude it with the impact of the awareness of the feminine features in the concept of God on the female world in particular and on the society at large.

Motherly God

The social milieu of the biblical times, of both Old and New Testaments, was patriarchal and so we have a number of masculine and male images of God in the Bible. The tender qualities and features attributed to the feminine world and female gender are implicitly present in the masculine and male figure of God. Nevertheless we can notice explicit feminine descriptions of God as well in the Old and in the New Testaments. So also in certain ancient Eastern Christian writings we come across feminine images of God.

Female expressions ascribed to a mother are profusely used for God in the Bible. Conception, carrying, bearing, begetting, delivering, womb, nursing, women in travail, suckling, loving a child, taking up in arms, healing, drawing the bands of love, bending over and feeding are examples of such usages found specially in the following biblical verses: Ex.34:6; Num.11:12; Deut. 32:18; Hos. 11:1; 3-4; Isa. 46: 3-4; 49:15; 63:16; 66:3; Ps. 25:6; 103:13; 116:5.

In the parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15: 11-13), the father is a symbol of God the Father waiting for the return of his wayward children. This story lacks the role of a mother. However the concerns and qualities of a mother are implicit in the Father. Parable of the woman (Lk. 15: 8-9) searching for the lost one coin out of ten also symbolizes the motherly figure of God the Father. So also in an ancient Syriac work, "Odes of Solomon" of the 3rd century, female imagery is employed for God. He is pictured as a "milked mother" and "nurturing mother".³

All these show that God is a "motherly" Father who gives life, sustains, loves and protects it; he is not just a "fatherly" Father of life; but is tender-hearted and motherly. God has care and concern for his children just like a mother towards her sons and daughters. According to Arellano, being bearers and sustainers of life, it is women who most insisted on discovering God as God of life and God as Mother, Which will have deeper implications in their lives.⁴ Yves Congar agrees with Brulle who said that in the eternal begetting of Son, God performed the functions of father and mother, in himself and bearing him in his womb.

Feminine Image of Christ

Christ is the Word incarnate. The Syriac term "melta" which means word is grammatically feminine; but the Greek "logos" for word is neuter. In any

case it is undisputable that Jesus, the Second Person in the Trinity lived on earth was a man. However we find in Him feminine virtues of love, compassion, tenderness and sympathy expressed through his attitudes, words and actions. His love and concern for Jerusalem was that of a mother hen: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often I wanted to gather your children just as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings and yet you would not" (Mt. 23:37). In the Gospels Jesus had always a tender disposition indicated by the Greek phrase, *splagchnizomai* which literally means "to be moved in one's bowels", translated as "he had compassion". So Jesus had compassion on the multitude (Mt. 9: 36); he had mercy on the blind (Mt. 20: 34); he had mercy on a leper (Mk. 1: 41); he had compassion on large crows, "sheep without shepherd" Mk.6: 34); he had compassion on a widow mother whose only son was dead (Lk. 7: 13). Jesus was moved with pity on all these occasions and responded to the needs of the people, like a tender mother to her children.

Feminine qualities are celebrated in Christ, giving rise to the medieval devotion to "Christ our Mother".⁵ The notion of motherhood of Christ could be seen also in the traditions. St. Anselm makes a reflection on the image of Christ on the cross- Christ as mother travelling in the pain of giving birth to her children⁶. On the Cross Christ was on birth pangs giving birth to the Church from his side, as Eve was shaped from the side of Adam.⁷

C.H. Kyung says that Asian women also depict Jesus as a compassionate mother who can feel with the suffering humanity and weep with them.⁸ Sometimes Jesus is also addressed by them as the "woman Messiah", the liberator of the oppressed.⁹ The figure of the pelican bird who feeds her young ones with her own blood is traditionally a symbol of Christ's motherly love expressed in the Eucharist.¹⁰

Usually wisdom ("Sophia" in Greek and "hokma" in Hebrew which are feminine) is attributed to the Word, Christ, in the New Testament, though it is appropriated to the Spirit of God in the Old Testament. In line with this idea an English mystic, Julian of Norwich, attributes motherhood to Jesus. She says that there are three attributes in the Trinity: Fatherhood, Motherhood and Lordship. According to her the great poser of Trinity is our Father, the deep wisdom our mother and the great love our Lord. Our Saviour is our true Mother in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come.¹¹ Giving life is the function of a mother and in John 10:10 we read that Christ came into this world to give us life in abundance.

There are Christian writers like Victorinus who would suggest the Second Person as androgynous, having masculine and feminine qualities - not only the Christ, but the Son in heaven. Gelpi comments on Victorinus and says Jesus was certainly male, who showed himself to be the Son of God not only through his maleness, but through his obedience - a way open to all men and women; Jesus can reveal the Divine Mother to us only because as a result of her enlightenment, he becomes that which is feminine and therefore

capable of revealing the feminine. The archetype of the androgyne stands for the reconciliation of the opposites - female and male - that takes place in Christ, that is the Divine Mother and Divine Father may be legitimately imaged as acting through their androgynous Son. If the Word is androgynous women represent the Word as much as do men.¹² The Church is the body of Christ and it consists of men and women which warrants that in the "total Christ" there are male and female, masculine and feminine members.

The Feminine Figure of the Holy Spirit

Among the three persons in the Trinity, feminine aspects are more prominent in the Holy Spirit than in the Father and in the Son. The Holy Spirit is reckoned as the feminine presence in the Godhead. These include the grammatical gender of the words used in the Hebrew Bible and the functions of the Holy Spirit, both in the immanent and the economic Trinity. However Jerome notes that "Spirit" is feminine in Hebrew - *ruah*, neuter in Greek - *pneuma*, masculine in Latin - *spiritus*, and he interpreted it as a sign of God's non-sexuality.¹³

To study the feminine figure of the Holy Spirit, first let us have a look at the word used in the Hebrew Bible for Spirit, *ruah*. The word *ruah* means also wind or breath. Grammatically the word *ruah* in Hebrew and *ruha* in Syriac are feminine in gender.¹⁴ So the functions ascribed to the Spirit of God are also mostly feminine in nature both in the Old and New Testaments. In early Syriac writings also we find the Holy Spirit addressed in feminine terms.

The mention of the Spirit appears in the beginning of the Bible as "hovering" over the waters (Gen. 1: 2). The word used here is *rahheb* meaning 'hovering' or 'brooding over' which is a feminine activity. The Spirit as a cosmic creative life force reappears in the Old Testament in Ps. 33: 6 and 104: 27-30, and reaches its zenith in the wisdom literature. The word *hokma* in Hebrew meaning wisdom (Greek *sophia*) is feminine. Wisdom and Spirit are identified in Wisdom 7: 21-8:1. The terminology employed here is usually reserved for God alone. Thus wisdom is everywhere, orders all things well and can do all things.

L. Boff goes to such an extent with Pneumatological and Mariological synthesis that he considers Mary as the "incarnated" Holy Spirit. His starting point is the Lukan text 1:35, "The Holy Spirit will come up on you" and the angel answered "and the power of the most High will overshadow you". The theological hypothesis of Boff here is that the Holy Spirit is taking on a human form in Mary in the same manner as the Word took on human form in Jesus. The Spirit is personally present to Mary just as the Son is incarnate in Jesus. The Holy Spirit divinizes Mary as a result of which she becomes the Mother of God. In his incarnation the Son divinized maleness explicitly and femaleness implicitly, and now the Holy Spirit divinized femaleness explicitly and maleness implicitly. Mary's divinization through her relationship to the Holy Spirit is the feminine parallel to the divinization of Jesus through his relationship to the Word¹⁵.

Commenting on Victorinus, Gelpi states that when New Testament says that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, it implies that She is the Mother of the Son in heaven and on earth.¹⁶ This goes with the consideration that Mary is the Mother of the Divinity and she is the "incarnation" of the Holy Spirit. Gelpi also sees in the Divine Breath or the Holy Spirit the experience of the enlightenment or the Divine Mind. Gelpi views the Spirit's conception of the Word as an act of enlightenment which could be considered as performed in the eternal now.¹⁷ Mary's experience of the Holy Spirit was so strong that she could make herself completely open to the Spirit to the point of enabling the conception of Jesus to take place.¹⁸

In the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity the weaving of the bodiliness of the Word happened in Mary's womb. Her flesh gave flesh to the Word of God to become human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth who was certainly a man. He was true God and true man in his incarnation, containing male flesh and female flesh.¹⁹

The maternal image of birth is associated with the Holy Spirit not only with the incantation and birth of Jesus, but also with the birth of the Church as depicted in Acts. 2. So also we can find in Jesus' words to be born again "of water and Spirit" (Jn 3: 5). We may also recall here the birth of Israel through the divine *ruah* mentioned in Ezekiel 37.

Quispel suggests as a new interpretation of the well known text about the women in Revelation 12. She is, he thinks, the Holy Spirit accompanying the Christian community in its flights from persecution and seeking refuge at Pella, as the *sekhina* accompanied people of God into exile. The birth of the male child would correspond to the baptism of Jesus, at which the Spirit is presented as "genetrix" in the "Gospel of Nazarenes".²⁰

In 1Cor 2: 4-16 Paul looks at the Holy Spirit as the mind of God and of Christ and according to Gelpi great number of such scriptural references that he cites on the Holy Spirit as the intelligence of the Divinity is missing in the contemporary Pneumatology as it is the reflection of the Trinitarian theology of the Middle Ages which had forgotten many biblical truths about the Holy Spirit. Traditionally as any branch of theology, our scanty pneumatological understanding also was the outcome of the fusion of Christian faith with Platonic metaphysics and not really the reflection of the biblical understanding of the Holy Spirit.²¹ This resulted in the absence of a well developed Pneumatology in the Western Catholic Church. The absence of the Holy Spirit led the West to find out a substitute moving hearts and touching deepest core of desires in motivating people and their feelings, making them feel loved, protected, welcomed and consoled. This resulted in substituting Pneumatology with Mariology.

In the Eastern Church there has been a stress on the function of the Holy Spirit in Christian life and the East always kept a harmonious balance between Christology and Pneumatology. In the East Syrian tradition the Holy Spirit is called "mother".²² According to this tradition in baptism a

person is reborn in the womb of the water where there is the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. Narsai compares the utterance of the priest in the water to the word of angel Gabriel to Mary at the good news of the incarnation.²³ Aphraates calls the Holy Spirit as Mother in another context. According to him the man who does not marry respects God his father and the Holy Spirit his mother, and he has no other love.²⁴

According to Gelpi the Spirit explicitly manifests the feminine energy of the Divinity, while the Son explicitly manifests the masculine energy of the Divinity. Cathleen O' Connor finds a personal image of the Holy Spirit in the biblical literature as Wisdom Woman. O' Connor thinks that the promise of the Wisdom Woman to enter into a relationship with people in which She reveals all that She is, is a promise in the Scripture which is reserved for the Divinity alone. He cites proverbs 1:23, "Behold, I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you," as example. Another one, Proverbs 8:33, "To find me is to find life", could be asserted only by the Divinity. The Wisdom woman makes identification with the Holy Spirit, which appears in Isaiah 40:13, "who has directed the Spirit of the Lord or who has been to him a counsellor".²⁵ Again Wisdom and Spirit are identified in Wisdom 9:17, "Who has learned thy counsel, unless thou has given wisdom and sent thy Holy Spirit from on high"²⁶ Here we may note that Jesus telling his disciples that when the Holy Spirit, the comforter and the Spirit of truth comes, he will teach them everything and guide into all truth (Jn. 14:26; 16:13).

Conclusion

In the light of modern thinking and reflections God cannot be identified with one of the sexes without the denial of his wholeness and transcendence. The new awakening that woman also shares the image of God and the fact that along with masculine imagery of God there must also be a complementary feminine imagery for the Deity would increase the self esteem of women and also arise a need in finding new symbols and terminology for speaking about God.

Aruna Gnanadasan points out that we have in India *Ardhanariswara*, a composite male-female figure of Hindu god, Siva with his consort Parvati, signifying the inseparable male and female principles in the universe and suggests that Asian theologians have to discover new concepts of the face of God from their cultural heritage and tradition²⁷. It is curious to note that in the Egyptian religion there is a divine family: Father, Mother and Son: *Orsis*, *Isis* and *Horus* respectively.²⁸ The awareness that men and women are both created in the image of God and in God there must be both male and female characteristics though he is not equated with either implies the equal dignity of man and woman.²⁹

In the East Syrian tradition by the image of God in man we understand that he represents the authority and love of God on earth. Man unifies the whole creation in himself – through his body the material universe and through his soul the incorporeal world. The whole creation is entrusted to him by

God as to a steward. So man has the responsibility to develop it as God's ambassador on earth. He also glorifies God on behalf of the entire creation.³⁰ Since woman also bears equally the image and likeness of God in her, she shares equal rights and duties with man on earth. In certain areas she can represent God's image better than a man. As a mother she has immense capacity to bestow God's love in the world; so also she has great potency to unite humanity and unify the universe and in a world where divisive forces are active more than ever, these functions of women have special significance. M.J. Manazan and S.A. Park mention about a particular area where women could be effective and can grow to fullness: "Asian women are delving into their own traditions, myths, and legends to provide them with the insights, values and inspiration in their effort toward the full flowering of their womanhood. On the other hand there is also need for women to undertake a critique of culture. They must actively participate in the interfaith dialogue to give feminist input, sorting out what are the really liberating elements and what are the oppressive elements in them."³¹

Though in each person of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, there are feminine attributes like compassion, gentleness, motherly concern and affection the Holy Spirit is projected most prominently as having feminine traits, especially as Mother and "Life Giver". Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ the Word incarnate, is considered metaphorically the "incarnation" of the Holy Spirit. The role of a woman as mother and life giver is something divine and of inestimable value and of highest status. The Pneumatological and Mariological dimensions of anthropological approach can give new opportunities to rediscover the identity of women in the society and in the Church. The new awakening and assertion of women will also have impact on the society, particularly men and their attitude towards the fair sex which will never allow any sort of discrimination against and exploitation of women and this will result in a new gender culture and gender justice.

E. Rae observes that the Biblical "feminine" Spirit was not only noted for 'her' gentleness, compassion and nurturance, but also she was always active and "on the go".³² This insight would certainly inspire women to involve in the affairs of the world with their unique qualities and capabilities and with a renewed sense of their mission in the world. In Rae's view, a new terminology of Trinitarian God, taking not of the feminine dimension in the Deity must make up of for the imbalance in the immanent and economic Trinity.³³ When there is proper balance, dominion will diminish and gradually disappear even in social, ecclesial or political spheres giving opportunities to all sections.³⁴ Finally the duty of all women today is to engage them in the process for change where they can be most effective posing a true feminine, not just valuable but as ultimately valuable and only the Divinity whom we worship is of ultimate value.³⁵

End Notes

- ¹Cf. YVES CONGAR, *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. III, New York 1989, 55
- ²Cf. BINGENER, *Woman, Time and Eternity*, in CONCILIUM, 1995/6, 98
- ³*Odes of Solomon* is the earliest Christian hymn book of baptismal hymns used for public worship. The original language of this 3rd century work is believed to be Syriac. The motherly figure is seen in Ode n. 19 and Ode n. 35. CHARLESWORTH, *Odes of Solomon*, Oxford 1973 is an excellent translation of this work.
- ⁴Cf. L. B. ALLERANO, "Women's Experience of God", in V. FABELLA and M.A. ODUYOYE, eds., *With passion and Compassion*, Maryknoll, New York, 1988, 136-137.
- ⁵Cf. A. CASSABUT, "Une dévotion médiévale peu connue, la dévotion à « Jésus notre Mere », *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, 25, 1949, 234-245.
- ⁶Cf. A. HUNT, *Trinity*, Maryknoll, New York 2005, 31-32.
- ⁷Cf. CONGAR, *I Believe*, 157.
- ⁸Cf. C.H. KYUNG, "Who is Jesus for Asian women", in R. S. SUGIRTHARAJH, ed., *Asian Face of Jesus*, Britain 232.
- ⁹Cf. P.S. KYUNG, *The Korean Nation and the Task of Women's Theology*, 51.
- ¹⁰Cf. A. HUNT, *Trinity*, Maryknoll New York, 2005, 32.
- ¹¹Cf. C. WOLTERS, *Julian of Norwich*, Revelations of divine Love, Hardsworth, 1966, 165.
- ¹²Cf. D.DELPI, *The Divine Mother: A Trinitarian theology of the Holy Spirit*, Lanham 1984, 232-234.
- ¹³Cf. CONGAR, *I Believe*, III, 57.
- ¹⁴By the 6th c. we find a shift: "ruah" when used to denote the Holy Spirit is masculine.
- ¹⁵L. BOFF, *The Maternal Face of God*, San Francisco and London 1987, 35.
- ¹⁶Cf. D.L. GELPI, *The Divine Mother: A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Lanham 1984, 217-218
- ¹⁷Cf. GELPI, *The Divine Mother*, 138
- ¹⁸Cf. L. BOFF, *Trinity and Society*, Maryknoll, New York 1989, 10.
- ¹⁹Cf. I.GEBARA and M.C. BINGEMER, *Mary Mother of God and Mother of the poor*, Maryknoll, New York and London 1989, 4-5.
- ²⁰Cf. GELPI, *The Divine Mother*, 45-46.
- ²¹Cf. GELPI, *The Divine Mother*, 60-63.
- ²²Cf. R. MURRAY, *Symbols of the Church and Kingdom, A study in Early Syriac Tradition*, Cambridge, 312-320
- ²³Cf. R.H. ONNOLLY, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, Texts and Studies 8, Cambridge 1909, 50. The Biblical reference here is to Lk. 1: 35.
- ²⁴Cf. APHRAATES, « Demonstrations XVII, De Virginitate et Sanctitate », *Patrologia Syriaca* 1, 839.
- ²⁵Cf. G.T. MONTAGUE, *The Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition*, New York 1976, 50.
- ²⁶Cf. C. M. O'CONNOR, *The wisdom Literature*, Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier 1988, 178.
- ²⁷Cf. A. GNANADASAN, "Women's Oppression: A Sinful Situation", in V. FABELLA and M.A. ODUYOYE, ed. *With Passion and Compassion*, Maryknoll, New York 1988, 74.

- ²⁸Cf. J.P. PRITCHARD, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, New Jersey. 1969, 4.
- ²⁹Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieribus Dignitatem*, 6.
- ³⁰Cf. I. ARICKAPPALIL, *The Holy Spirit in Narsai of Nisibis*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome 1991 (Excerpts published), 165-169.
- ³¹M.J. MANAZAN and S.I PARK, "Emerging Spirituality of Asian Women", in V. FABELLA and M.A. ODUYOYE, *With Passion*, 86.
- ³²Cf. E. RAE, *Women, the Earth and the Divine*. Mary knoll New York 1994,93
- ³³Cf. RAE, *Women*,89
- ³⁴The statement of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India to "Offer at least 35% (moving towards an ideal 50%) representation of women as office-bearers and members on parish and diocesan pastoral council, ..." could be read in this spirit. Cf. "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society", Statement of CBCI in the 28th Plenary Assembly of the CBCI, Jamshedpur, 13th-20th February, 2008, 5.viii.
- ³⁵Cf. Rae, *Women*, 82