

WOMEN EXPERIENCING AND NAMING GOD

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We are in the midst of an unprecedented revolution in our language for God. Contemporary challenges to traditional God-language center on its exclusive use of male metaphors, especially that of Father. This one-sided naming of God runs the risk of idolatry, the danger of confusing one human symbol with the divine reality. Furthermore, our limited God-language distorts all our relationships. As Ana-Maria Rizzuto points out in *The Birth of the Living God*, our God-image is a major element in our view of self, others and the world. Its development and influence span the entire life cycle from birth to death.¹

The exclusive use of male God-language restricts the religious experience of all believers, but it is especially destructive for women. From the time we are very young we learn that all the symbols for what is most sacred in life are male. Ultimate religious authority and meaning are found in a male God, a male savior, and male church leaders. As Carol Christ says, woman “can never have the experience that is freely available to every man and boy in her culture, of having her full sexual identity affirmed as being in the image and likeness of God.”² As a consequence, it is difficult for her to believe deeply in her own sacredness, her power, and her capacity to image the divine. No wonder, then, that many women struggle throughout life with feelings of low self-worth.

Spiritual directors are concerned not only with the broader religious and social implications of this ferment, but also with the shape it takes in the lives of individual women. In what ways can spiritual guides support efforts to heal and expand our God-language?

Women enter the current discussion at various levels. Some do not rely on images for their personal prayer, and are most concerned about the liturgical and political force of God-language. Some women are content to retain the traditional images and experience no problem with them. Others find themselves with a broken symbol system, surrounded by traditional images which no longer speak to them. Many of these women are engaged in the journey to new metaphors, attempting to heal old images or integrate new ones into their spirituality.

Keeping in mind these diverse responses to the current crisis in God-language, the spiritual direction context can be helpful in several ways. It can provide a woman with (1) an opportunity to understand and express her own experience of God, (2) an interpretive framework for dealing with the loss of traditional symbol systems, and (3) suggestions for transforming the imagination in relation to our images of God.

Experiencing God

Language and experience are interrelated. One aspect of this relationship is the capacity of language to control and limit our experience. This is particularly true of the language of the imagination. Sandra Schneiders makes this point very well in *Women and the Word*. It can easily be established, Schneiders believes, that the God of

Judaeo-Christian revelation is not male and that Jesus' maleness is theologically irrelevant.

This helps very little, however, because the real problem is not in the area of religious experience or spirituality. How women experience themselves in relation to God, Christ, and Church is profoundly affected by the imputed masculinity of God which is operative in the imaginations of both male and female believers.³

We all know persons who find it hard to believe in God's love and mercy because their dominant image of God, usually formed in childhood, is that of an exacting Judge. Likewise, those who relate to God as Father, King, and Lord have closed out experiences of self and God that might be facilitated by images of God as Mother, Gentle Wind, or Woman in Childbirth. The effort to change language is not an expendable agenda; it has far-reaching consequences for the spiritual life.

Because of the reciprocal relationship between language and experience, religious experience is not only conditioned by, but also shapes, our language for the divine. A variety of approaches to expanding our language for God is then essential. The first, and most revolutionary, is a deepening of our lives of contemplation. Women throughout history have believed in the authority of their own direct experience of God. Teresa of Avila speaks of the soul as a beautiful palace with walls of crystal; God is a brilliant diamond at the very heart of this palace. From her prayer some images of God as a fountain at the very center of her being or as a brilliant sun giving light to every part of her.

Constance FitzGerald, in an article on impasse and the dark night, formulates well the contemporary significance of this relationship of experience to language.

Yet every religious experience comes from a meeting with a new and challenging face of God in one's own time and social situation. I suspect that although it is imperative, for example, for feminist theologians to develop new interpretive paradigms that function to liberate people, only women's experience of God can alter or renew our God images and perhaps our doctrine of God.⁴

Contemplative prayer is a way of discovering God, ourselves, and other persons. Continual encounters with God in prayer have power to transform our established images of the divine, whatever they may be.

Contemplation is thus the deepest basis of change and one of the strongest forces both for establishing our identity and for seeing the world in God's light. Through contemplation we prepare for the disclosures of the divine. One woman describes the fruits of her silent prayer of contemplation in this way.

On some level I am aware of the spirit of life in the body of life. On some level I am aware of my most real self and the most real other at the same time. As I breathe in and out, the inner and the outer, the self and the Other, are somehow not two, but one. I am more and more convinced that we either find our true selves AND GOD, or we don't find either one, and, of course, only if we have found our true selves and God can we let go of both and let God be God.

In contemplation we can move beyond the rational mode of action, based on the subject/object split which has determined our lives and politics, to a sense of unity with other persons and the environment.

In a variety of ways women are drawing on their experience to influence language for the divine. As previous metaphors prove inadequate to that experience of God, they develop additional images. This process is described in some of their own statements.

I used to think of God as Father, which was good at the time because my own father was a positive influence on my life. With my more recent understanding of the role of women in the world, I can't image God as male anymore. It's hard for me to image God in any human form now. I think of God as truth, life, love, energy.

I used to see myself as a child and God as my Father. Now I see myself as an adult in whom God resides. I find God in other people and relate to God through concern for them and for creating a just world---which I view as God's future reign.

I have come to a place where I no longer use words and images in prayer. When I need to use an image to communicate to someone else, I use El Shaddai, the color of purple, "the fire and the rose are one."

I see myself as *with* God in whom we live and move and have our being, closer than breathing. It used to be a hierarchy, now it is *cooperation*, being with God. We both moved---God has come "down" and I've gone "up." The Great Dichotomy is dead!

My images of God vary. Sometimes they are from nature---a shelter from the storm; a warm, gentle sun; rain on parched earth. Sometimes God is a pregnant woman, a friend, a male lover.

Primarily I image God as woman, as mother. I also have some familiar images from childhood---God as a tall evergreen tree;

God as a Rock; God as the oceanbed without which the ocean would not be ocean; God as Fire. I am especially drawn to John's various "I am. . ." statements. The beating heart is a recent image from the past year or so. So is a clean brightness or radiant light.

I am often sheltered or protected by God. I am hugged or held, loved. Recently I often stand or move forward with God behind me, around me as a cloak. The picture of the child in the hand of God conveys the feeling but that is *not* the image. I do not often now see myself as a child.

Reflected in these women's statements is the theological truth that since God is present in all of creation, any aspect of that creation can be a sacrament of the divine presence. Many images disclose aspects of the divine; none can encompass it. As these women also indicate, changes in our personal images for God occur gradually over a period of time. We may not notice them at first. Spiritual direction is often an opportunity to recognize and appropriate them.

The primary role of a spiritual friend then, in this time of changing language for God, is to support a woman's efforts to grow in a life of prayer and to name God out of that experience. In addition, spiritual direction can be a helpful setting for exploring more fully our images of God and the role they play in our perception of self and world.

No image functions in exactly the same way for every individual. Some women comment in spiritual direction, for example, that they understand theoretically the way in which the image of God as Father has sustained a patriarchal church and culture. However, for them personally, the metaphor has not had patriarchal connotations. As one woman said:

I have never thought of God as father in a stern, judgmental way. Nor in terms of hierarchy. I think I attribute to him the best of the qualities I found in my own father: gentleness, a love of nature, affection and warmth. I can't pray to God as Mother. That image just doesn't speak to me at all.

Another woman, whose father died when she was very young, likewise found that her deepest prayer experiences were with God as Father. She was somewhat apologetic about saying this, because she felt it contradicted the feminist stance she held toward life in other areas. But as she described her prayer, it was clear that in centering herself in prayer to God as Father she experienced love, healing, and an empowering presence that enabled her to move out toward life with courage and energy. As we noted earlier, metaphors for God both shape and are shaped by our life experiences, especially our most significant relationships. Because of their positive experiences of fatherhood or the healing way they have related to God as Father in prayer, this image is for some women free from patriarchal overtones, and functions rather as one appropriate way of experiencing God.

Spiritual classics provide additional examples of the way God-images affect a woman's view of reality. Julian of Norwich wrote a short version of her *Revelations of Divine Love* which she later expanded over a period of twenty years into the Long Text. The Long Text contains not only greatly expanded images of God as female, but a marked decrease in disparaging comments about herself. As her image of god expanded, her self-concept became stronger and more secure.⁵

As is clear from these examples, a spiritual guide's role is not to promote any one image of God, but rather to support a woman's process of understanding how she images the divine and how her images affect her life.

Strong support for this approach comes from the research into the spirituality of the high middle ages by Caroline Walker Bynum. In her *Jesus as Mother*, she examines the writings of women mystics of the thirteenth century, exploring the function of religious imagery in their lives. Setting aside assumptions and unwarranted generalizations, Bynum begins with the religious images of the period and then moves back into the experience of the individuals or groups that produced them. Her research leads her to the conclusion that there is no necessary affinity between thirteenth century women and female imagery.

*If women are particularly attracted by images of women, why is it that monks refer more frequently to the virgin Mary, while women concentrate especially on the infant or adolescent Christ? Clearly other answers are needed.*⁶

The same method enables her to understand the relationship between the mysticism of thirteenth century women and their exercise of an authority not grounded in office. It was their mystical union, Bynum finds, which empowered them to serve as counselors, mediators, and channels to the sacraments.

*The visions of the nuns of Helfta projected them into the priestly role from which they were clearly by canon law excluded. Despite an increasing effort in the thirteenth century to curtail clerical activities by women and a clear understanding in theology of woman's inferiority in the natural order, these women did not perceive their gender either as a disqualification for service or as an image to express the soul's incapacity or baseness. Their teaching, counseling, and consoling was done with power and serenity.*⁷

Bynum's careful reflection on the religious imagery of these women reveals how their religious experience made them question the typical ways religious power was exercised in their time.

Bynum's method underscores some important points about exploring God-imagery in the spiritual direction context: (1) the need to set aside assumptions and generalizations in order to understand more fully the complex role religious imagery actually plays in a person's life, and (2) the importance of noticing the significance

religious imagery has for a woman's sense of the authority of the self. Images of God and self are very closely connected, and a change in one brings about a change in the other.

This is borne out by testimony from contemporary women who state that a new awareness of their own authority followed upon changes in their image of God. Rather than being an external force, God became the source of a new inner power.

Now my sense of God is not outside of myself but a very deep "core" sense of being in God and God being deeply in me. I have a stronger sense of being myself and having choices. I see myself as strong; before I relied on God to tell me everything. God, I think, is pleased with me and my becoming of age.

God is a deep inner presence in my being and present in others and all of creation. My image is more of one who permeates the human spirit with goodness, which contrasts to a Father-image I once had. Now my relationship with God is very bonded, connected to the core of my being, whole and affirming. It has changed from an up-down relationship, when I imaged God as Father.

I see God as connecting people together---no face or form. I used to be apathetic. I went through the motions but had no real feeling about God or Jesus. He seemed a wimp the way I was educated. Mary was the only one we were comfortable praying to as kids. Then when I began to see how messed up the world was I was *angry*. I had to begin to see God as not all powerful or in control before we could have a relationship. Now I try to see what I can do to help make the world a little better. God doesn't do it alone. God needs our help.

These women experience God as closer and more immanent, but less easily imaginable; this immanence of God is for them the basis of a belief in the interrelatedness of all of life.

Spiritual direction is an opportunity, then, for a woman to give voice to her experience of God and to discover its importance in shaping her understanding of self and the world. While engaged in this process some women find that they have let go of previous images, but that no new symbols have arisen to replace those of a dying patriarchal order. They look to spiritual direction for help in accepting this loss and bringing something new to birth.

Interpreting the Loss of Symbols

When familiar religious symbols no longer hold meaning for us, it is important to remember that our spiritual lives take two interrelated paths to God. One path, traditionally called the kataphatic and exemplified by spiritual writers such as Teresa of

Avila and Ignatius of Loyola, emphasizes our capacity to reach God through creatures, images, and symbols. It underscores the similarity between God and creation which is the basis for an incarnational and sacramental vision. Annie Dillard's opening statement in *Holy the Firm* conveys something of this vision.

Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time. I worship each god, I praise each day splintered down, splintered down and wrapped in time like a husk, a husk of many colors spreading, at dawn fast over the mountains split.⁸

This kataphatic way has been the dominant approach in western spirituality, and is the spiritual path many women follow.

Today there is a revival of interest in another dimension of the tradition, that approach which sees all particular expressions of God as radically inadequate. The current questioning of patriarchal God-language is one of the forces contributing to renewed awareness of this avenue to God. This path, which is called the apophatic, finds expression in the writings of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, John of the Cross, Simone Weil, and Thomas Merton. It emphasizes that God is "not this, not that." Because of the radical differences between God and creatures, God is best known in obscure awareness, and, at times, in darkness. Meister Eckhart in the thirteenth century spoke with the frequently paradoxical language of this path when he said that it is possible to be so poor that one does not even have a God. The apophatic focus is also captured in the familiar Zen saying that we are not to confuse the pointing finger with the moon to which it points. Everything is a finger pointing to God, but no created thing is God. The "negative way" is not a uniform phenomenon; rather, it is expressed distinctively in different traditions.

These two paths, the kataphatic and apophatic, intersect and converge in most spiritual lives. However, the apophatic traditions provides a helpful interpretive framework for women when traditional God symbols lose meaning for them. This approach stresses God's radical transcendence of social structure and provides a prophetic witness against systems that absolutize assertions about the divine.

The apophatic path goes by way of the desert, with its experience of waiting and struggle, of emptiness and seeming loss of faith. Along this path we may encounter the Dark Night which John of the Cross speaks of as part of the movement from meditation to silent imageless contemplation. Those called to apophatic prayer experience what John of the Cross referred to as a "binding" of their ordinary mental faculties in prayer. The call to this prayer is then really no longer a choice; it becomes the only way left to pray.⁹ One woman describes her experience of it in a moving way.

It was only after the sense of Presence left me that I recognized its existence and importance in my life. Of course I thought the sense of presence left me because I had done something wrong. It never occurred to me that I was embarking on a new stage of my inner life; rather it seemed that my inner life was now over, that perhaps it had been delusion in the first place. I only knew

that I was in pain, that I could not pray in my usual way (or any way at all), that reading scripture was dry and repulsive to me, and that it was painful to go to Mass and the sacraments.

This description conveys well the experience of the apophatic path as a desert where we feel abandoned by God and left to our own resources, cut off from the divine presence that was once our deepest satisfaction and fulfillment.

For a number of women today the desert experience coincides with their increasing inability to relate to traditional religious symbols that are embedded in patriarchy. As one woman said,

The old answers that used to speak, no long speak to me, and the passages of scripture in which I once felt comfort are no longer comforting. There is a silence in me that as yet has no voice.

Some women find help at this time by being introduced to a form of centering prayer, if this has not already been a part of their prayer experience. In such prayer we contact the God who dwells in the depths of our selves, at the center of our existence. Thomas Merton describes this way of prayer as

a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothingness and Silence. . . . It is not "thinking about" anything, but a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible. ¹⁰

Since it is centered on attention in faith to the presence of God and on resting in God's love, this prayer does not depend on imagining or conceiving an image of God. Women can pray in this way even when all the symbol systems on which they relied are collapsing.

Some women relate to the writings of the twentieth century philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil, when they find themselves in this desert. Simone Weil speaks of prayer as waiting for God or attention. This is a receptive mode of being which creates a space for God's coming. It is an emptiness, but one marked by desire. In illustrating the meaning of attention, Weil recounts an Eskimo story about the origin of light: "In the eternal darkness, the crow, unable to find any food, longed for light, and the earth was illumined."¹¹ Attention, or desire directed toward God, can open one to the gift of a direct experience of God. Like others who follow the apophatic path, Weil's writings are filled with the language of paradox and contradiction. God is in the absence; with the death of familiar symbols we are thrown back on the experience of God, on watching and waiting for God's coming.

Although experiences of darkness deepen awareness of the incomprehensibility of God, they are a painful time. Spiritual friends can provide reassurance that God is present in the darkness, that it is a process of transformation and grace. John of the Cross calls this night of faith the second night; in the movement toward union with God faith becomes the sole guide. Such faith leads us into mystery because it "informs us of matters we have never seen or known, either in themselves or in their likeness."¹² When concepts and images are empty, God is bringing about a transformation in love of

our capacity for union. A new experience of God is breaking through as everything is relocated within a new horizon in which it will be radically reinterpreted.

Transforming The Religious Imagination

The imagination is changed and healed when addressed in its own language, that is, in the concrete language of image, metaphor and story. Integrating a new image into prayer is a different process from analyzing its adequacy from a theological perspective, though the two are related. Myths, symbols and images touch the deepest levels of the self and affect behavior in ways we may not be totally aware of on a conscious level. New information, though helpful, is not enough. A woman came to spiritual direction after hearing a lecture on images of God. The speaker's points resonated with her experience; she realized that she wanted to expand her God-images. "However," she said, "just saying the words doesn't necessarily make it happen." Another woman wanted to change her image of God as Father. She needed to retain the metaphor in some form in order to heal her relationship with her own father. However, she wanted a new experience of God as Father, and asked if I thought that was possible.

The process of integrating new images into our spiritual lives involves not only *talking* about new metaphors, but praying to God under these new names, seeing self and world through these images, and incorporating them into our litanies and rituals. One woman, for example, who felt strongly attracted to female images for God, began using the passage from Matthew 23:37 for her prayer: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I wanted to gather your children as a mother bird gathers her young under her wings, and you would not!" While praying with this passage, the woman had a very strong experience of the presence of God surrounding her. She came back to this image of Jesus as Mother Hen frequently in her prayer, and moved from it to the image of God as Mother Eagle (Ex 19:4). She said that birds had always been a special part of nature for her, and this might be one reason why she liked these images so much. During the spring she took morning walks around a lake, praying with the image as she saw various birds in the area. It opened to her new dimensions of God's desire for her to be free and strong.

As this woman's case illustrates, a symbol or image achieves power in the spiritual life by gradually unfolding its significance; since the imagination works by association, one symbol often unites with another in expanding and deepening its meaning. As new images are integrated into one's spiritual life, old images are changed in light of them, for example, if God is prayed to as mother as well as father, then the fatherhood of God often takes on new qualities, such as tenderness and nurturance.

As is clear from the previous illustration, the imagination calls for participation. Integration of an image into the spiritual life does not happen if we remain outside observers, studying the metaphor from a detached distance. We must interact with the symbol in some way, establishing a relationship with God through the symbol, and drawing out its meaning in terms of that relationship.

Artistic forms can be helpful here. Because the language of the imagination works by suggestion, its insights are often stated best in indirect ways. For example, we are rediscovering the stream of tradition which names God Lady Wisdom. Lady Wisdom or

Sophia offers women a model of divine female power, an image full of strong, creative energy.¹³ One way of exploring that power is for women to express in clay the feelings evolved by calling God Lady Wisdom. The use of clay brings out unexpressed feelings one has in relation to an image of God.

Poetry is another avenue of entry into an image. Women who are mothers are frequently drawn to the image of God as mother, not as a parent in relation to themselves, but as an affirmation of the sacredness of their role as mother. Their relationship to the metaphor is one of identification. During a reflection period in a class I taught on female images of God, one mother wandered out to the library steps where she saw another mother nursing her baby. She composed the following piece, which she later shared with the class.

God is like an Asian mother
nursing her tiny dark baby
in the shade on the north side
of the library, sitting on the ground.

She doesn't speak English
It doesn't matter.
I am a nursing mother
We are one.

She is not ashamed of nurturing
I need nurturing and
I am also one who nurtures others.

Blessed be the Name of God.

Exercises in guided imagination are helpful to some women as they attempt to rework images of God, self, and others in light of their new understandings. In her journal one woman recorded part of such an experience.

Then in inviting my image of God as She to be present,
it became very difficult:

She was behind me. . .
She seemed small. . .
She would not come forward. . .
She kept her head down. . .
She would not speak. . .

I asked her, again, to come to me, but she couldn't.

The woman found this experience to be a very important revelation. She had looked for God in images of sky, rock, and storm, but she saw that God was to be found in the small voice

within, though it was still bound and hesitant. She therefore embarked on a prayer of waiting, listening to and nurturing that voice.

This emphasis on approaches to healing the imagination is not meant to obscure the importance of theological reflection. *Thinking* about God in new ways is intrinsic to the transformation of God-metaphors. It is especially important for women whose approach to the spiritual life is primarily through reason. A very helpful instance of such an approach is Sallie McFague's discussion of God as mother, lover and friend in *Models of God*.¹⁴ McFague argues convincingly, for example, that friendship is a rich and hopeful way of speaking about the God-world relationship. The metaphor of friendship conveys certain aspects of a mature relationship with God, such as mutuality and companionship; it expresses the ideal of interdependence among peoples of all ages, both sexes, and whatever color and religion. Furthermore, friendship with God in our ecological and nuclear age can be seen as focused on a common project: the well-being of the earth. Like the models of mother and lover, the model of God as friend reveals a non-hierarchical, inclusive love of all. A theological analysis such as McFague's serves an important function in a woman's spiritual life, clarifying the meaning of God-metaphors and motivating her to expand her relationship to God and to others.

In this chapter we have explored several ways in which the spiritual direction context can help women in a time of changing language for God. Primary among these is support for women's efforts to deepen their lives of contemplation and give expression to the relationship they experience there. Spiritual friendship also supports women in the experiences of darkness and emptiness that result from the loss of familiar symbols. Finally, it can be a setting for integrating new images into the spiritual life, thus freeing the imagination from the limitations of a language dominated by male images and opening up new possibilities for the spiritual life.

Notes

1 (University of Chicago Press, 1979).

2 "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections," in *Womanspirit Rising*, p. 275.

3 (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), pp. 6-7.

4 "Impasse and Dark Night," in *Women's Spirituality. Resources for Christian Development*, p. 302.

5 See Virginia Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, p. 117.

6 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 173.

7 *Jesus As Mother*, p. 227.

8 (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 11.

9 A helpful description of this path is found in Julia Gatta, *Three Spiritual Directors for Our Time: Julian of Norwich, The Cloud of Unknowing, Walter Hilton* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1986), pp. 91-124.

10 Quoted by M. Basil Pennington, in "Centering Prayer," *America* (February 28, 1987), 169.

11 *Waiting For God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 107.

12 *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1973), *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Book II, chap. 3, no. 1.

13 See Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig, *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

14 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987). See also her *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

