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Knowing God Personally

Reflections on the Feminist Concept of Patriarchy (1993)[1]

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One of the many slave-spirituals that have survived the American Civil War begins, "When I get to heaven I am going to argue with the Father, and chatter with the Son." There is something deeply moving about these few words. Written in the antebellum period of American history when African Americans, like the slaves in Plato's Republic, were outside the protection of the law, they are a declaration of hope and joyful anticipation.

Of course, we moderns might say that such spirituals are also anthropomorphic projections into an idealized future state. No doubt this is true; but if this is so, such projections reveal something of the context in which African Americans found themselves. Slaves on the farms and plantations of the American South were denied the full status of human beings, for by definition slave-masters were owners of property and chattels, not people. While on the one hand slaves were asked, like people, to "obey their masters" as a Christian duty, on the other hand they were denied, as sub-humans, the rights of ordinary citizens.

The endemic problem of the one-parent family among African Americans in today's inner cities is rooted in slavery, where no family was safe from the absolute power of the slave-owner: both women and men were raped, beaten, and killed. Children were sold to other farmers and households,

1. Originally published in *Different Gospels*, edited by Andrew Walker, 173–93. London: SPCK, 1993.

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women were separated from their husbands, and life was literally "nasty, brutish, and short."

Even the apparent kindness of Christian slave-owners flattered to deceive. One of Harriet Beecher Stowe's most scathing attacks in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is reserved for Mr. Shelby, the Christian gentleman who literally sells Tom down the river (the Mississippi). Although Shelby is depicted as decent and genuinely fond of Tom, when it comes to a time of hardship the economies of scale dominate his morality and he demonstrates that at depth for him Tom is essentially a commodity of capitalism.

For many slaves, family life was either a fantasy or a fleeting reality; the family was characterized by impermanence and more often than not a missing or forgotten father. An overriding problem, then, for slave-mothers and children was not patriarchy, but its absence. American slaves were, we ought to remind ourselves, African, with their cultural roots in tribalism. Patriarchy within such a social structure could perform much the same oppressive role as secular feminists believe it plays in contemporary Western societies. But there was also a positive side to it.

A few years ago a Nigerian reminded the British Council of Churches, who were debating the merits of artificial insemination, that for most Africans the significance of fatherhood is not a question of sexual politics, but of self-identification. Not to know your father is to lose your identity within the complex web of kinship that constitutes the African tribe. (This would not be so for all Africans, for some tribes are matriarchal, where personal identity and communal acceptance is handed down from the mother.)

In what Levine has called "the sacred world of the slaves," antebellum African Americans, cut off from their traditional families and tribal eldership, came to identify themselves symbolically with the children of Israel: "When Israel was in Egypt's land. Let my people go." The politics of oppression for the slaves was not black patriarchy, but what Kenneth Stamp has called "the peculiar institution" of slavery. The slave-owner was the enemy, like the Pharaoh of old, but his comeuppance was sure: "O Mary don't you weep, Pharaoh's armies got drowned." The symbolic transformation of slaves into the chosen people fueled both a genuine theology of redemptive suffering and the demand of an oppressed people for liberation and justice. The chief helpers in slave salvation were "brother Jesus" and "brother Moses."

Significantly, neither Moses nor Jesus were the sentimental figures of later black gospel music: they were warrior kings, deliverers, messiahs. Jesus in particular was identified as no less than the emancipator of Israel: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Deut 5:6).

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Slave-spirituals were coded so that white Christian masters could not fully understand the abolitionist message of "Roll Jordan, roll" and "Canaan's land." Even the apparently pious and apolitical "Steal away to Jesus" was a militant call by slave-leaders to defy the authorities, who in the name of a white Protestant hegemony forbade Christian slave-religion. To steal away was to leave the slave-quarters at night and go to the secret "hush harbors" where, surrounded by firs soaked in water to deaden the sounds of liturgy, slaves would dance the sacred dances and sing the songs of freedom.

In the light of this secret yet defiant religion, perhaps the fragment quoted at the beginning of this essay begins to look not merely moving, but somehow right. Admittedly, no mother-figure appears in the glimpse of heaven—mother is always with us, unlike father who is absent—but the text tells us nothing about the gender of the songwriter. The author of the spiritual may have been a woman. If she was, there would be something particularly satisfying about the family portrait of life in heaven. (Imagine the scene as one where a daughter is arguing with her father and chatting with her brother.) We have in this picture a tableau of perfect equality, for this is an image not of deference, but of robust personal relationship.

Of course, such an imagining is probably too farfetched: theologians might think that the slave's glimpse of heaven reflects a binitarian view of God, where the argumentative Father and the chattering Son drown out the still small voice of the Spirit, who will have no face "until we have faces." However, coming from a Western tradition that finds it difficult to conceptualize God as Trinity and that tends to conceive of God as two male buddies from a Hemingway novel or as a Father and Son who are so locked into each other in mutual admiration that they exclude all others, such a dismissive view of slave-spirituality is uncalled for. The true significance of the slave-spiritual lies not in whether it measures up to Augustinian (or Cappadocian) orthodoxy, but in what it tells us about knowing God. And what this fragment tells us is that the slave has found a Father whom she knows and trusts well enough to argue with, just as Job (as Jung so insightfully saw) was mature enough to answer God back. Jane Williams captures the importance of growing up to face God as he is, and ourselves as we are, when she says of those who unquestioningly accept the fatherhood of God: "How can they hear the gospel of the crucified Christ, if they have their thumb in their mouth and their head on the bosom of the Father?"[2]

But before we move on, let us take one more glance at our slave spiritual, for we find that in heaven not only is the liberated slave confident enough to argue with the Father, but that there is no evidence from the text that

2. Williams, "The Fatherhood of God," 91.

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the Father will forbid such argumentative discourse: arguing is impolite on formal occasions, but it is nonnative among friends and family. It is this lack of formality that is so delightful in the spiritual: in heaven we argue with the one and we chatter with the other. You can only chatter when you are at ease with someone, say with friends round a table, or at home. Chatting is light-hearted talk with someone of equal standing. To chatter with a slave-owner would be an impossibility. Even small-talk with a king could not be properly described as "chatting," for you have to be given permission to join in the conversation. But talking with "brother Jesus" is as natural as talking to a comrade-in-arms or a fellow sufferer in a refuge for battered wives. We chatter with him because he is one of us, or because we are one with him.

The eschatological vision of the slave is the fulfilment of creation, where the barriers are down between God and humankind: rapport is established, broken relationships are mended, and yet each member of this eternal conversation is free to be themselves. It is perhaps too much to suggest that the *sehnsucht* (the brief thrill of joy) of the slave is nothing less than the beatific vision where the redeemed are caught up in the coinherence of the divine Trinity, but we are nevertheless offered a glimpse of freedom and fellowship, sisterhood and brotherhood, distinctness but togetherness. In this glimpse we may also imagine that the scene of gossip and reminiscence, of argument and self-assertion, takes place around a table laden with food. Being in heaven is, after all, nothing less than the divine banquet of the kingdom where there is neither slave nor freeman, male nor female, lord nor subject. The image is not so much one of equality—certainly not of uniformity—but of communion.

FEMINISM, PATRIARCHY, AND CHRISTIANITY

Over a hundred years ago Marx and Engels saw an analogy between slavery and the inferior position of women in society. Today, with some justice, feminists argue that men still treat women as chattels, drudges, sex objects, virtual slaves. The polemic against men is not so much in individualistic or moralistic terms (not all men are sexist), but rather in institutional, linguistic, and symbolical ones. The gloss feminists usually put on this cultural dominance of women by men is patriarchy. Patriarchy, then, is not used anthropologically as an index, say, of tribal leadership, nor is it a synonym for dominant fatherhood (though such dominance would be an example of patriarchy). To talk of patriarchy is to highlight the relentless oppression and marginalization of women by men. In this respect, slavery in the American South was also, in feminist eyes, a brutal example of patriarchy.

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Since the 1960s feminists' scholars utilizing hermeneutical, historical, and philosophical studies have been at pains to spell out meticulously the reality of patriarchy from the political arena to the novel. Even the icons of liberal permissiveness have not escaped. It is doubtful, for example, whether readers will ever feel the same again about the writings of D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, or Norman Mailer when they see how in her *Sexual Politics* Kate Millett exposes their contempt for women.

Feminism, however, is not all of a piece. Not only has there been for the last twenty-five years a distinction between the socialists and other radicals, but the non-socialist radicals are themselves divided into opposing camps. There are anarchists and revisionists, separatists and integrationists. These in turn can be distinguished from liberal feminists and even post-feminists. Within the radical and liberal camps there are also philosophical and ideological distinctions ranging from existentialism to process philosophy to deconstructionism.

These many divisions, and others too, are reflected in religious feminism. Those who hold to a Christian orthodoxy should bear this in mind. It is misleading, if not wicked, to classify (as some conservatives tend to) the majority of religious feminists as lesbians or gnostics, members of Wicca, or followers of the New Age. Nor should traditionalists insist that there is any logical connection between the ordination of women (regardless of whether we are for it or against it) and a radical reconstruction of Christian theology along feminist lines.

This is so because religious feminism is a plurality within which we can find writings that are compatible with Christian orthodoxy. So, for example, Janet Martin Soskice's work has a postmodernist thrust to it, but she is a very conservative Catholic compared to the more liberationist Rosemary Radford Ruether. And even she has fiercely maintained her Catholic allegiance, and is deeply critical of Daphne Hampson, who has left Christianity behind for a post-Christian theism.

There are, of course, other feminists who have felt compelled to abandon Christianity—one thinks of the still-influential Mary Daly and of the avowed paganism of Judith Plaskow. Yet many who have stayed loyal to Christianity are quite modest and reformist in their aims. The conservative feminism of Elaine Storkey and of Alwyn Marriage comes to mind; and the radical orthodoxy of Sarah Coakley and of Sally McFague has a great deal to offer classical theology, and cannot simply be dismissed as modernist or fashionable. In short, to reiterate an earlier point, feminism *per se* is not a threat to Christian orthodoxy: it is a matter of isolating those feminist strains that are inimical to the gospel and of welcoming those that are at the heart of it.

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Some feminists insist, however, that patriarchy is not an epiphenomenon of Christianity, but of its essence—the Christian gospel is itself, so the argument goes, irredeemably sexist. Daphne Hampson, for example, eventually decided to leave Christianity because she became convinced that no amount of social reconstruction could rescue it from patriarchy. Against Dr. Hampson, Christian orthodoxy maintains that the heart of the gospel is not patriarchy, but the personal love of God for the world. Following St. Paul, we assert that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (2 Cor 5:19). This reconciliation allows us to respond to the love of God so that we, like the slave in the spiritual, can come to know him personally.

But such an assertion, though it may be an insistence that love is the *bona fides* of the gospel, is not a refutation of the claim that patriarchal thinking and practice permeate Christianity. On the contrary, to read Hampson, Ruether, and Daly, and then to go on to read Elizabeth Clark and Peter Brown's work on the early church is to recognize that there is genuine evidence for the feminist claim that Christianity is patriarchal. Christianity does not get off that lightly, for there is a genuine case to be answered.

However, there are two things that we need to clarify.

First, that a great many of the theological opinions of the fathers of the early church were themselves influenced by the patriarchy of their own cultures, so that they inadvertently imported sexist presuppositions into Christian theology. Second, that much of the language used of God in the Bible—and hence in dogmatic orthodoxy—is indeed *male*; but, as we shall see, it is debatable whether this is truly patriarchal.

In so far as we have inherited many of the church fathers' presuppositions about women, the first problem can be dealt with only by repentance, for here we are talking about sin—we may be able to excuse the fathers and our ancestors for ignorance, but not ourselves. The second issue is more complicated, for it is probably impossible to translate the original linguistic context of the gospel into language acceptable to many radical feminists. Furthermore, were such a successful translation possible, it would win only a token victory for feminism, but at the cost of losing much of the content of the gospel. Ironically, it is trinitarian orthodoxy itself that offers a solution, as we shall see.

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The Rise of Opposing Archetypes of Women in the Christian Tradition

A brief look at the theological anthropology of the early church will demonstrate clearly what we have isolated as the first problem, the overt sexism of the fathers of the early church.

Ambrosiaster, writing in the fourth century, said: "For how can it be said of woman that she is in the image of God when she is demonstrably subject to male dominion and has no authority? For she can neither teach nor be a witness in a court nor take an oath nor be a judge."[3]

We might think this a very odd way to do theology, but in fact the usual way of explaining women's intrinsic inferiority to men was, following St. Paul, to insist that women are not made in the image of God: "A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man" (1 Cor 11:7).

Actually, the church fathers conceived the superior image of men in different ways. Augustine, for example, in a way typical of his thinking, saw the divine image as a property that the man possessed but the woman did not. This rather physicalist sense of spiritual inheritance is analogous to his belief that original sin is a property of all human beings since the fall.

John Chrysostom, on the other hand, understood the *imago dei* more in terms of authority than property: "Then why is the man said to be in the image of God and the woman not?" Because "image" has rather to do with authority, and this only the man has; the woman has it no longer."[4] Chrysostom may here be echoing that Neoplatonic view more fully expressed by Gregory of Nyssa, who unlike Augustine saw man and woman as both made in the image of God in a sort of humanoid or androgynous state; but then there was a second creation, as it were, where human materiality was manifested in the forms of male and female nature. Subsequent to the fall into humanity (or the coming to be in fallen humanity), the woman became a helper to the man and submitted to his authority.[5]

Even where the fathers were positive about the equality of women and men in terms of the *imago dei* (Gen 1:27), two factors combined to keep women in a position of inferiority:

1. The fathers understood the begetting of the Logos in eternity to denote not an event, but to highlight the one nature and being of the Father and Son. However, when they came to Eve's begotten-ness in space and

3. Elwes, *Women's Voices*, 19.
4. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 35.
5. Coakley, "Creaturehood Before God: Male and Female," 349–50.

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time, they tended to say (to parody Arius): "There was a time when she was not." To continue our Arian parallel, we could say that they saw the subsequent creation of woman as secondary to or less than the fullness of the male prototype. (It is probably unjust to accuse the Cappadocians of this view.)

2. In the Genesis narrative, Eve is the first to sin, and this is taken to mean she is therefore more culpable than Adam. The perfidiousness of Eve is then projected on to all womankind. Tertullian's hounding of the second sex is well illustrated by his infamous and oft-quoted remarks: "you are the Devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of the tree; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not brave enough to approach; you so lightly crushed the image of God, the man Adam; because of your punishment, that is death, even the Son of God had to die."[6]

Women as the second and therefore secondary sex were doubly cursed, then, because the second sex sinned first. Women were often viewed in terms of this doubly dimmed divine image, so that an antinomy was created between the male as rational and therefore more like God's image, and the female as carnal, lower, bodily, subordinate, dependent, and therefore less like God's image. Bodily materials, superabundant in women, were potentially dangerous if not treacherous. In later scholasticism, for example in Aquinas, the woman was seen as an illegitimate or "misbegotten male."[7]

The view of women as lacking authority, carnal, unreliable, and potentially treacherous, developed at its worst into an archetype of Eve the temptress or the pagan sorceress Morgan le Fay. This is a type popular with misogynists. Sometimes she is made even more horrifying by being endowed not only with cunning, but also with power. Rider Haggard's *She* comes to mind, or the Lady Janis in C. S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew*. As with Sax Rohmer's evil Fu Manchu, women, like the Chinese, can be seen to be far more threatening if they are diabolical.

More usually, however, the carnal, bodily woman has been characterized as passive rather than powerful. She is responsive to men rather than an initiator, fecund rather than truly passionate; she is not so much Mother Courage as Mother Earth.

In the early church, women could become more spiritual, and hence more like men, if they overcame their bodies in ascetic endeavor. This became an increasingly acceptable form of spiritual and social advancement for women in the early Middle Ages (though even as early as the third

6. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 39.

7. Hayter, *The New Eve in Christ*, 84.

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century there were Syriac women ascetics whose heads were shorn to show at-one-ment with men).

Gregory of Nyssa, under the influence of his saintly sister Macrina, clearly found the base and lewd archetype demeaning to women. Following his lead, over time a more positive archetype of women developed which militated against the misbegotten/diabolical/doubly-dimmed model. This was made possible by emphasizing the positive spiritual virtues of the woman as the helper, supporter, altruist, intuitionist.

From the early Middle Ages, in both East and West, the cult of Mary as the *theotokos* (literally the God-bearer) gave bodily and human expression to the high view of female spirituality, where purity, virginity, and self-abnegation—"Be it unto me according to thy will"—reinforced the virtues of altruism. In medieval icons the Madonna presents her child as an offering to the world, while her eyes do not look at us demanding recognition, but are turned inwards in mystic contemplation of the Word of God whom she has also mysteriously brought to life.

It is surely a curious fact that today this more positive but one-sided view of women, reinforced by Jungian archetypes, finds support from both traditionalists and some feminists. The extreme representative of this view is Leonardo Boff, who attempts to link the Holy Spirit, women, and the *theotokos* ontologically. Alwyn Marriage, who falls into the category of what Ruether has called "conservative romanticism," finds herself in broad agreement with the Orthodox priest Thomas Hopko, for they both see a direct relationship between womankind and the Holy Spirit, whom they consider feminine in character.

However, for many feminists today both archetypes—women as unspiritual and women as super-spiritual—are caricatures of reality. The one condemns them to a permanent status of moral and intellectual inferiority—appendages to men, like the created Eve who was made from Adam's spare' rib—and the other spiritualizes them to the point of powerlessness and sexlessness. Where are the positive aspects of passion and authority to be found?

In the era of date rapes, battered wives, and household skivvies, the suffering-servant model of spirituality is on the one hand a truism for many women, and on the other hand unfortunately only too true. As the suffering servant, Christ, was neither a masochist who reveled in a cult of suffering nor was he forced to suffer against his will: he voluntarily went to the cross. In the Christian tradition, suffering is made redemptive because of grace and the power of God in weakness, not because there is anything intrinsically good in it or because it is the peculiar charism of women. Even such an unlikely source as Walt Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* gets this right. Belle,

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a modern girl of independent mind and spirit, voluntarily submits to the beast for a higher purpose, and in the end comes to love him.

On the surface it might seem sensible, as Marriage does, to identify the Spirit as feminine so that women can feel personally identified with the godhead. This might seem less radically feminist than renaming the Father "Mother," or refusing to call God Father at all. If we were to feminize the Spirit, would not this be in concert with a distant and rare strain of the fathers, and thus the Christian tradition? Would it not mean that women could come to know God as personally and as naturally as the slave came to argue with the Father and chatter with the Son?

The short answer to both questions is "no." There are a number of problems here. To begin with, Boff, Marriage, and Hopko suffer from the problem of convincing us of the legitimacy of the spiritual feminine archetype just as much as we have difficulty in accepting women as intrinsically perfidious. Most neurological investigations of men and women recognize only minor differences in intelligence and aptitude. Cross-cultural studies demonstrate that the givenness of biological distinction between the sexes does not match gender roles in any isomorphic way.

From an anthropological point of view, it is clear that to talk of feminine and masculine traits is to talk of a cluster of archetypical attributes that are scattered throughout the human population, both male and female. No doubt the debate on the intrinsic differences between men and women is still open, but experience suggests that good and bad, spiritual and unspiritual, initiation and response, rational and intuitive, domination and submission cut across gender categories rather than reinforce them. Even the much disputed meaning of the Greek word *kephale* (head) in Paul (Eph 5:23; cf. Col 1:18) appears to refer to a principle of covenanted headship, not a list of male and female attributes.

Typically, however, counter-evidence does not seem to cut much ice with archetypal thinking, whether Neoplatonic or Jungian. Empirical and experiential evidence is put down as distortion, atypicality, perversion, or merely surface evidence. Jungian archetypes, we need to remember, are truly a priori: we take them on faith in Jung, not from revelation or through analytical reasoning. May it not be that Jungian archetypes, like all feminine and masculine archetypes, are social constructions and culturally determined ideas rather than objective realities?

To doubt the reality of archetypes is to engage in a philosophical argument that is as old as Plato and the Stoics, but there are two more things to say. First, from a feminist perspective, we find that the idea of a feminization of God in the person of the Spirit does not militate against patriarchy: it reinforces it. The Spirit as the *vinculum amoris* (literally the bond of love)

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is self-effacing between the Father and the Son. She is discreet, like a veiled handmaiden, or cramped and fleeting, like an eternal Cinderella. Projecting femininity into the Trinity in this way does not balance the seemingly male dominance of the Father and Son. On the contrary, it introduces a dangerous form of subordinationism in which the Trinity is depicted, in descending order, as a father, his dutiful son, and a submissive daughter who also defers to her brother.

Such feminist objections shade into orthodox theological ones. To depict the Holy Spirit solely as altruistic and self-abnegating is to achieve for the Spirit what *filoque* did for the Western tradition. Go-between gods, or handmaidens, have a habit, like good servant-girls, of remaining so much in the background that no one can remember their names. In Barth's theology, for example, angels are ontologically weak because they are, as messengers from God, *only* messages of God. Similarly, the Spirit's ontological status as the feminine loving-bond is uncertain in a Godhead where a new note of subservience seems to have been introduced. The Son may be said to be subordinate to the Father as a matter of will, not of nature, but if the Spirit ceases to be "the Lord and giver of life," as the Nicene Creed insists, what is the hypostatic status (personal reality) of this Spirit?

Attempting to raise the status of women by aligning them with the third person of the Trinity may be a valiant attempt to ameliorate the worst aspects of patriarchy, but it has the unfortunate effect of reducing both the Spirit and women to second-class citizens. In short, this seemingly reformist move neither satisfies radical feminism nor orthodox Christianity, for patriarchy is reinforced and the Holy Spirit is lowered to the status of a servant-girl.

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GENDER AND PERSONS

One does not usually find radical feminism and Christian orthodoxy agreeing in this way. However, there is surely no room for agreement on the question of whether we should call God "Father" or replace him with some other notation (or even another god)? On this issue, some feminist reconstructions of the fatherhood of God are undeniably inimical to orthodoxy, but orthodoxy itself needs to be reminded of its own history.

For example, it may be in order to assert that God is Father ontologically as long as God as *pater* is understood, in the words of Maximus the Confessor, to be the *pege theotetos* ("divine fount") of the Trinity. It is illegitimate to imply, however, that God as Father is *masculine* in any way. The overwhelming view of the patristic age is that gender is an inappropriate

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label to attach to the godhead. Strictly speaking, the only legitimate sense in which we can talk of gender and God is to mention the incarnate Son. We cannot say that Jesus was male from all eternity, for God is Spirit and gender is a biological, creaturely attribute. *Ipso facto* we cannot say that God as Father is male or the Spirit is female.

The Arians were guilty of literalizing the fatherhood of God by insisting that Jesus was the consequence (or product) of the Father's begetting. Indeed, part of Athanasius' attack on Arianism was directed against its inability to recognize metaphorical language. The thrust of John 3:16 and the language of begetting suggest not maleness, but divine origin or unity of being with the Father. This is why, in the West, the Council of Toledo in AD 625 felt it perfectly in order to refer to the Son as from the Father's *womb* (*de utero Patris*).

We might want to assert, as many traditionalists do, that the ascension means that there is now a man at the heart of the Trinity. However, this can be misleading, for it might be taken to mean that the assumption of our Lord into heaven has grafted only maleness into the godhead, and Gregory Nazianzen's aphorism, "That which he could not assume he could not restore," might then be wrongly used to say that Jesus did not recapitulate *all* human nature in his own person, and that women are therefore excluded from salvation. It is clear, however, that this was *not* what St. Irenaeus meant when he spoke of the incarnation as a *recapitulatio* (*Adv. Haer*. 11.20.3). Surely the paradoxical message of the gospel's scandalous particularity is that, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God is reconciling *all* the world to himself, whether free or bond, male or female, Jew or gentile.

On a more controversial note, Gregory Nazianzen's friend Gregory of Nyssa believed that the risen and ascended Lord did not remain a mere man: he, like the divine Trinity, is also *beyond gender*.

It is difficult for us to appreciate this androgynous view of personhood, for as creatures we cannot, for the most part, understand ourselves apart from the fact that we are sexual beings (even many feminist groups think in terms of sisterhood rather than asexuality or unisexuality). Gregory of Nyssa was of course influenced in his view by Platonism, but he also drew on the New Testament, with Jesus' insistence that "at the resurrection" men and women would not marry, but would be like the angels (Matt 22:30).

Nyssa's argument can best be appreciated if we realize that for him human personhood is not a function of gender, but the trace or stamp of God's own personal life in creation. Gender is made necessary because of the exigency of procreation, but personhood is beyond necessity and is not bound to nature. For him, the concept of person is a theological not a biological category. We are persons because we share, albeit brokenly, in the

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personal life of God. This sharing occurs through the *imago dei*. But because of Christ's passion we can now be adopted by the Spirit into the very life (or body) of Christ, where we begin to grow to maturity. We are still limited by our creatureliness, however: we can only see God "in a glass darkly"—as sons, daughters, friends. At the final judgement we shall see God as God is, for we will have obtained true personal stature ourselves. Human nature will not be obliterated, but it will be transfigured into new life, no longer differentiated by gender.

But to return to ourselves, living in a gender-soaked world as we do, outside of direct mystical experience it is not possible to envisage or image a personal God beyond gender. That is why we have so much difficulty with the hidden personality of the Holy Spirit. And that is also why personal knowledge of God has to be mediated through a human understanding and experience of personhood. God, after all, mediated his divinity to us through the humanity and particularity of his incarnate Son.

But do we have to image God *exclusively* as male? To be as blunt as it is possible to be: to conceive of God as male is idolatry, and therefore blasphemy. It is true that in the Old Testament the language used of God is overwhelmingly masculine—no doubt reflecting a patriarchal culture and reacting against immoral fertility cults. However, the name of God—the name that is above every name—is beyond imaging. This God, this Yahweh—in being the "I Am That I Am"—is truly (in the literal Greek sense of *a*gnostic) *unknown* by us. Although the names "mother" (once) and "father" (eleven times) are used to describe the God of Abraham and Isaac (here we see the positive understanding of patriarchy that we noticed in our slave story), on the whole Yahweh is the God who will be what he will be: "Thou shalt make no graven image . . . ."

When we turn to the New Testament, an initial reading of it might suggest that God has been cut down to size—domesticated as it were—by becoming simply Father (mentioned 170 times). Is this not a loss of otherness, a diminishing, through imaging, of God?

We could take it to be that, but in fact there are two movements towards God in the New Testament. First there is the humanized and immanent God that we see portrayed in the relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father. It is not so much that Yahweh is denied, but that like the Russification of the Byzantine icons of Christ we move from the stem to the tender, from the wholly other to the known. The shocking and yet touching use by Jesus of "Abba" may not be quite "daddy," but it is certainly the personalized "thou." (Jesus, of course, could not call God "Mother," for she, like the slave's mother, was present with him.)

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And yet, the New Testament also struggles against the cozy and domestic warmth of Father/Son language, The Epistle to the Ephesians, for example, begins with an unmistakable trinitarian movement that moves beyond the more usual Christocentric language of Paul, We are reminded in the first chapter of Ephesians, as the church fathers would later make explicit, that God remains transcendent, all powerful, and unknown, The developing *apophatic* tradition in the Orthodox East was a recognition that God is always more than we can say, imagine, or image. The self-revelation of God in Christ was also, for the fathers, an invitation by Christ through the Spirit into the heart of a personal life that shattered the meagre, though reassuring, icons of domesticity or the self-absorbed bonding of Father and Son.

Fatherhood, Parricide, and the Trinitarian Promise

Let us look briefly at God as Father and as Trinity, and ask ourselves whether such traditional God-talk amounts to patriarchal language.

We might start by saying that the faith once delivered to the saints is contingent on the culture and history of its time. It might seem unreasonable to insist that the language of this culture is binding on us. But if it is true to say that the gospel needs to be inculturated into each new historical epoch and national culture this is not the same thing as saying that it can be adapted willy-nilly to new cultural forms without loss of content.

Can we differentiate the gospel from its linguistic context? Bultmann thought that we could, but it can be argued that his existential search for the kernel of truth left him with nothing but the husk of his own philosophical system. We remember Tyrrell's comment that the nineteenth-century quest for the historical Jesus resulted in the German theologians finding nothing but their own reflections in the well of history. Since Feuerbach and Freud, we have become accustomed to a patriarchal God who is nothing more than our projections. This argument grew out of an acceptance of the idea that the Kantian noumenal world was a closed system that reflected back human desires and ideologies.

The Christian use of "Father," however, is not due to an insistence on the intrinsic maleness of the Godhead that somehow shines through from the beyond, nor is it even because the Father notation for God is sanctioned in liturgy and by tradition. We call God Father *because Jesus did*. God is Father for us, if you will, because together with our Lord we are the *totus Christus*.

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We need not be afraid to be simply biblical about it. Father language, as Athanasius recognized, is the language of the New Testament, and we have no right to cut and paste the sacred text as we please (though, of course, that is precisely what some critical New Testament scholarship does). Yet if we are attentive to the Gospels we cannot fail to see that God the Father as Jesus experiences him is beyond gender and stereotype, for he is motherly and protective as well as strong and holy; he is certainly not domineering and patriarchal.

And this brings us all, men and women, to a serious difficulty calling God a father at all. The problem is a psychological and a pastoral one: how can we love God as our heavenly Father when our own fathers are often so emotionally crippling, dismissive, and cruel? This problem has a corollary: could we call God Mother (leaving aside for the moment the fact that there is no sanction for it in the biblical texts), if our experience of mothers is one of domination, cloying smother-love, or manipulation? If these descriptions sound as if we are falling back into sexist archetypes, let us be more provocative: can an anorexic bring herself to call God mother? It is of course unfair to suggest that all women who suffer from anorexia are alienated from their mothers, but many are. Furthermore, many of us who do not suffer from eating disorders have other sad stories to tell of our failed relationships with our mothers.

In Western culture, perhaps the most significant function fathers can play for their daughters is to affirm them in their independence—"When I get to heaven I am going to argue with the Father . . . ." Grown-up girls no longer give their hearts to daddy, but to their partners; or, like Mary after the birth of our Lord, they ponder things in their own hearts. Good fathers relinquish their authority over their daughters and yet confirm them in their right to be themselves—maybe such fathers are more important for growth and mature human relationships than we imagine. It is difficult to think of such fatherhood as patriarchy.

Metropolitan Anthony, of the Russian Orthodox Church, has often spoken of the barrier that bruised relationships can impose when approaching God personally. He is convinced that we start with God where we can, for he will meet us where we are. Starting from where we are may lead us, in time, to be able to accept God as our Father. But first we may need to be able to forgive him for being our Father, or at least, in accepting him, to forgive our own fathers on earth "who have trespassed against us." If we can do that we will discover that God is also lover and healer, joy unspeakable, beyond God the Father. This is not a question of a bitter pill for women to swallow in the hope that the medicine may do them good—millions of men fear and loathe their fathers; they too have been betrayed, bullied,

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abused, abandoned, and savaged by other men. Did the crucified Son, who had already suffered the anguish of anticipated death in the garden, suffer a greater anguish in actual death because he was forsaken by his father?

A radical orthodoxy for our day needs to begin to dissociate the language of patriarchy (as feminists define it) from the New Testament language of fatherhood. This necessitates *complementary*—not substitute—symbols and metaphors for God: the erotic language of Christian mystics, the agape intimacy of friendship, the "language" of silent wonder. We need also to learn again that Jesus is Lord, not in the sense of liege or master, but as the liberator who brings freedom to the oppressed. Such a proactive approach is necessitated by (a) the clumsy nature of the English language, which does not contain the nuances and feminine-sensitive pronouns that we find in, say, Greek, French, and Russian, and (b) because it is an imperative of the gospel. It is not enough for men to shrug their shoulders and say to women, "The language of the Bible is male; it's tough, but that's the way it is; take it or leave it." Unless Christian men are prepared actively to show that they really do cherish women, as Christ does the church, many will leave it.

How many of our priests and theological educators take the trouble to explain to laypeople that Christian orthodoxy denies the ontological gender of the Godhead? Do they imaginatively and creatively demonstrate that God as Father is Mother too, and yet, against Feuerbach, is the prototype of true personal relations, of which our flesh-and-blood mothers and fathers are, at best, dimmed icons? It may very well be that the feminist indictment against the church should not be directed at its male language and fatherly symbols but at its failure to explicate these in the light of trinitarian tradition.

The Holy Trinity by its very personal yet triadic nature constantly militates against the overriding binitarianism of the Father/Son model: God as Trinity bursts asunder preconceptions of God. It is not the manly erotic father, like Zeus on one of his many excursions of seduction, who lays with the maiden of Israel: she is overshadowed by the Spirit. Jesus wants to gather the inhabitants of Jerusalem like a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings and yet he cracks the whip in the temple and overturns the money-tables. The Father is as proud as a mother at a bar mitzvah as he affirms his Son on the banks of the Jordan, "You are my Son, . . . with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11).

These days, it is not fashionable to distinguish the so-called economic Trinity (God as he is revealed to the world) from the immanent Trinity (the hidden life of God's eternal being). Yet if, like the Greek fathers, we were not so coy, we would find that the immanent God is not a monadic narcissistic being who is in love with himself, not two selfish, exclusive and adoring men, nor indeed a tritheistic committee of super-powers deciding the fate

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of the world from some empyrean Elysian fields. To look at the immanent Trinity would be to see in theological terms what the slave saw in vision and hope: God is personal love outpoured from the Father to the Spirit through the Son. The Spirit does indeed defer to the Son, but so do all the persons of the Trinity defer to each other in mutual reciprocity. God is love outspoken in perfect freedom and personal communion. This is no sop to modem feminism: it is the classical faith that, as a child of the Enlightenment, Daphne Hampson had already abandoned long before she insisted that the Trinity was itself irredeemably sexist.[1] True, many men and women are sexist, but ignorance, stupidity, sin, or the lust for power are responsible for this, not the fatherhood of God and the life of the blessed Trinity.

It is time, however, to put the fatherhood of God back where it belongs: inside the Trinity, not over and against it. If God as Father is allowed out alone—as he tended to be by second-generation Calvinists—he soon comes to resemble at best John Robinson's bearded old man in the sky, or at worst he degenerates not into the lawgiver, but into a tyrant like the depraved slave-owner Simon Legree in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

In so far that he is still around—this despot, this "father," this rogue patriarch—he needs to be killed. If this amounts to an Oedipus complex for women, then they need not be dismayed: killing him is justifiable homicide, for this is not God the Father but his distorted shadow, slouching to phenomenal existence through the open wounds in the noumenal world.

Conclusion

One could argue that patriarchy in Christianity is not essentially bound up with the male language of the Godhead. Eradicating such language will certainly not eliminate patriarchy. Buddhism and Hinduism, despite their immanentist theology and imaginative use of gender names for God, are deeply patriarchal. Increasingly, many radical feminists are realizing this; replacing God the Father with Mother God, for example, is not a solution to patriarchy, merely a semantic substitution.

The more radical tack is to transcend gender concepts completely, and with them personal categories also. The seminal work here is Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*, where we are presented with a God of Power, Justice, and Love.[2] Indeed, Daly's predilection for substituting non-personal nouns for personal ones is compounded by her preference for substituting verbs for nouns. Janet Morley's trinitarian blessing exemplifies a full-blown Dalyesque:

1. Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, 154.
2. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 127.

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May the God who dances in creation,
who embraces us with human love,
who shakes our lives like thunder,
bless us and drive us out with power
to fill the world with her justice.

This type of approach poses a far greater threat to Christian orthodoxy than Daphne Hampson ever will, or Wicca witches for that matter (for they can only beckon to us from the outside). Partly because it seems merely a minor matter of adjustment, but also because it panders to political correctness, we are witnessing a widespread and increasing use of functional and modalistic language, which is replacing an ontological and a personal one. It is, for example, becoming a commonplace in many of our seminaries and churches to replace Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with the functional substitutes, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. It seems innocent enough, yet such a schema is a disaster, for although it might score a surface victory against sexism, or at least "cock a snook" at patriarchy, it has in fact sold the gospel, like Uncle Tom, down the river.

It fails on two accounts. First, it fails on a basic level of biblical adequacy. To say, for example, that the Spirit is the Sustainer is hardly a comprehensive description of the Spirit's attributes and eco-nomic functions. Is not the Spirit 'the Lord and giver of life, the mover upon the waters, the one who overshadowed the Virgin Mary, endowed Jesus with power, raised him from the dead, and baptized the Church with fire? Is Jesus not the Creator too, and the Father the Redeemer and Sustainer?

Traditional language is indeed inadequate to express the fullness of God, and no doubt lazy and harmful "male talk" winds its way out of non-reflective usage and comfortable ways. But old language cannot be changed by ideological fiat or by the policing of political caucuses: there has to be a community change of consciousness over a considerable period of time before new concepts become the coin of common usage. Furthermore, it is sometimes necessary to resist such change if what we are offered is politically correct but theologically wrong. The Christian name for God is the Holy Trinity. God as Trinity is revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These names need to be imaginatively and sensitively explicated—even buttressed by complementary names—but they are not open to negotiation or substitution. Patriarchy cannot be destroyed by abandoning Father as a name for God, but orthodoxy can be. The difference between the apostolic faith and apostasy, as happened over the Arian dispute at Nicaea, can hang on a single word.

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This leads to the second problem with the non-sexist, functionalist schema: it is no longer sufficiently Christian to allow us to know God personally. Western modalism since Augustine has faced this problem, but at least Augustine, over and against Sabellius, was orthodox. But the triadic Creator-Redeemer-Sustainer is void of revealed personhood and empty of true personal content. Our slave would know this instantly. You cannot argue with the Creator as you can with your heavenly Father, for, as Job discovered, he will put you in your place. And how would you chat to the Redeemer if you could not also relate to him as your brother? Would you dare address him, let alone have a chat?

If the slave-spiritual did include a Sustainer, it would probably be a mother, the only rock against which slavery consistently broke. To say this, however, is to admit that we have gone as far as we can with the hermeneutic of the spiritual through which we have approached this essay. (Moreover, the Sustainer as mother would endear herself as little to feminists as Paul's talk of being "Christ's slave" (1 Cor 7:22) would be helpful to real slaves.)

We do not need to be romantic and pretend that for the slave being in heaven was anything other than an anthropomorphic longing to "move up a little higher." But neither should we assume that that is all there was to it; such human yearning is not the betrayal of faith, but its essence. By grace we are called not to click smoothly into place with the clockwork savior, the watchmaker, and the repair girl (or whatever other functional equivalent we can find for God). We are called, women and men, in Martin Luther King's words, to be "free at last": free *from* fear and free *to* know God personally.

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