

# In God's Image?

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*'The human mother will suckle her child with her own milk, but our beloved Mother, Jesus, feeds us with himself, and, with the most tender courtesy, does it by means of the blessed Sacrament.'* (Julian of Norwich)<sup>1</sup>

*'It blurs the whole nature of the difference of the sexes if the woman does not play her proper part. She cannot be an icon of Christ, representing him at the altar.'* (Graham Leonard)<sup>2</sup>

These two quotations are separated not only by several centuries, but also by opposing assumptions about how we may think about God, and about which analogies from human experience are appropriate. Interestingly, it is not the modern comment which is particularly surprising or disturbing. Whether we happen to agree with the bishop or not, the argument feels familiar. But the picture of a breast-feeding woman is by no means a traditional image of the Eucharist. Some might consider it shocking, or at least in rather poor taste, and these feelings are worth exploring.

Mother Julian picks out for comment an element in the Eucharist which, though fundamental, is easy to miss – the ordinary, everyday act of feeding and being fed. One does not emerge from a service *physically* satisfied: in fact, a modern Communion wafer is so far from being a hunk of real bread that it looks as if it has tried to refine itself out of material existence altogether, into some sort of ethereal concept. I was brought down to earth recently at an informal celebration. Instead of individual hosts, the consecrated bread consisted of home-baked brown rolls. At the point where the bread is to be broken, the priest called on the women on either side of the table to help. The picture stays in my mind of two women, leaning over a table, efficiently dividing up rolls – dishing up the meal. Two things struck me. I had never before thought of Holy Communion as a meal to be 'dished up'; and also, how odd it was that it should be offensive to contemplate a woman 'serving out' the Eucharistic meal, considering how often it is her expected function at ordinary meals.

But Julian of Norwich goes further than to remind us that the sacrament feeds us. With her image, we have regressed to infancy, and are shown to be totally dependent for our life on the gracious

self-giving of Christ. The analogy, particularly now in a culture where breast-feeding is neither widely nor publicly practised, is an embarrassing one. But it is embarrassing not only for prudish reasons: first, it is not dignified to think of ourselves as hungry babies, needy, vulnerable, and greedy for physical comfort. The term 'sons of God' never suggested anything so infantile as that. Again, we are likely to feel uncomfortable with an image which associates the mystery of the Eucharist with anything so cuddly, sweaty, and physically gratifying, and – worse yet – also associates Christ with an activity so uncompromisingly female. Here, in contrast with the images our tradition has led us to expect, an experience which only women can have is held up as an icon of Christ's tender love.

Julian does precisely what Dr Leonard urges us not to do, namely to 'blur the whole nature of the difference of the sexes', by juxtaposing 'Mother' with 'Himself'. How odd. It is impossible to envisage a male mother; the noun and the pronoun grate against each other. But this dissonance can also be seen as appropriate; for surely an image of God must be illuminating without being too enticing. It should contain an analogy precise enough for us to glimpse God's radiance: but if the metaphor does not at the same time profess its limitations, we can be left mistaking image for essence. Julian's strange syntax prevents this by mentally tripping us up. But other, more familiar images have hidden snags. We are used to hearing God described in terms that are exclusively male: Bridegroom, Husband, Father, King, and so on, and the variety of roles reminds us not to dwell on any particular one as summing up God's nature. But the incidental implication of maleness seems to have slipped in as essential. We might not normally even notice the male pronoun when applied to God. 'He' seems to convey God's personhood without drawing attention to its limitations as a masculine metaphor. If tackled about the dangers of this invisible analogy, most people might defend 'He' as a generic term: 'He includes She'. But when the pronouns are reversed, or a female image produced, it becomes clear that, when applied to the deity, 'She' is not included. Try altering all the pronouns of a hymn, and you will see how dramatic the difference is. (e.g. 'Praise my soul the King of Heaven', where the male pronoun is sung 30 times). To refer to God as 'She' is to become immediately aware of the limitations of that metaphor – it is seen as demeaning to God to imply femaleness.

Dr Leonard's comments reflect this discomfort. He is speaking, of course, about the ordination of women, from within a tradition that has a strongly representative theology of priesthood. I do not here want to discuss women's ordination, only to concentrate briefly on the idea that women are inappropriate 'icons' to convey

the grace of God in Christ. It is interesting that Dr Leonard immediately disclaims the notion that women are inferior, for he goes on, 'She is not lesser, but different.' It is a notion that can hardly fail to spring to mind. For if his remarks are to be taken seriously, it follows that women are not only 'different' from men: we are also 'different' from God in some essential way that has nothing to do with our common status as God's creatures. This is crucial, for it creates in women a sense of isolation, of exclusion, of 'otherness'. For an image or analogy works in two directions at once. If a human relationship, let us say a marriage, is available as means of understanding God's love for us, then to celebrate that recognition is also to lend a new dignity to each ordinary, stumbling marriage relationship. Correspondingly, if we insist that some area of life is *not* potentially 'godlike' – and here we are thinking of experience specific to women – then we are effectively writing it off.

C S Lewis, writing early on in the modern controversy about women priests, seems to be doing just that:

'Only one wearing the masculine uniform can . . . represent the Lord to the church, for we are all corporately and individually feminine to Him. We men often make very bad priests; that is because we are insufficiently masculine. It is no cure to call in those who are not masculine at all.'<sup>3</sup>

Here we have the provocative notion that femininity is a sort of pale shadow of masculinity, and that God is to be thought of, not as personhood transcended, but as masculinity taken to the 'nth' degree. (Consider, then, the pain, and the sense of worthlessness, of being among those who 'are not masculine at all'). Here, a woman is defined only as a reflection of a reflection. The thought is a common one in our culture – 'He for God only, she for God in him' – and it is based on St Paul (1 Cor 11:7).

'A man should certainly not cover his head, since he is the image of God and reflects God's glory; but the woman is the reflection of man's glory.'<sup>4</sup>

What Paul goes on to say makes it clear that his arguments are derived from the creation stories in Genesis, and, as usual, Genesis has something powerfully ambiguous to say on the subject.

There are two separate accounts of human creation in Genesis. Both tackle the issue of 'godlikeness' in human beings, but from quite different viewpoints. The later, priestly account presents humanity as the pinnacle of creation, with an inherent likeness to God. (Gen 1: 27)

'God created man in the image of himself,  
in the image of God he created him,  
male and female he created them.'

Here, and again at Gen 5: 1-3, it is firmly asserted that humanity is

both male and female in God's image. But the other account, Gen chap 2 – 4, appears to be trying to explain the problem of 'fallenness' in human nature: that human beings yearn for 'godlikeness' and yet always fall lamentably short of the ideal. In this story, humans are not presented as glorious and godlike. Indeed, they are fashioned 'of dust from the soil', and Yahweh seems concerned first to prevent, and then to punish, their higher aspirations to become like the Godhead. (Gen 3: 22)

'Then Yahweh God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, with his knowledge of good and evil' . . . So Yahweh God expelled him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he had been taken.' Dust to dust.

In this version, and it is the one most people remember, 'Adam' is created first, and then a woman is fashioned from his side to be his companion. Phyllis Trible's recent reading of these chapters urges us to consider 'Adam' not as a male, but as a sexually undifferentiated human being. But the traditional view, persistently and powerfully depicted in theological writings, in literature and art, is that God created a male first, and that therefore it is the male who has the special relationship with, and likeness to, God. For instance, think of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. The reclining Adam gazes towards his creator, his limbs relaxed, and his arm trustingly stretched out. An aged but muscular God, with a physical resemblance to the man, leans from heaven, his forefinger an inch from Adam's, as if the man has just been freshly sculpted. He returns Adam's gaze with an intimacy which, as far as I know, has never been paralleled in any depiction of the creation of Eve. Indeed, violence would be done to our theological and aesthetic expectations, were the reclining figure that of an equally beautiful woman. In our culture, we should probably interpret the scene as one of the famous seductions of Jupiter. God's special relationship with Adam, then, is what Genesis chap 2 – 4 probably conjures up for us. And so it is important to notice that this creation story *nowhere* suggests that 'Adam' was in God's image, only that man and woman alike have a sinful capacity to yearn for such a status. St Paul, along with contemporary Jewish commentators, and his disciples ever since, has conflated the two accounts, putting together the prior creation of Adam and the likeness to God. In fact, the two accounts make rather different points.

St Augustine was aware of the ambiguity in Genesis, and presented an ingenious solution, conceding a partial 'godlikeness' in woman, but preserving the special status of the man:

'The woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that the whole substance may be one image, but when she is referred to separately in her quality of helpmeet, which

regards the woman herself alone, then she is not the image of God; but as regards the man alone, he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman too is joined with him.<sup>4</sup>

It is a formula calculated to provoke amusement or indignation in the modern reader, but I doubt whether we are equally honest today about our ambivalence towards women.

I have dwelt on the question of whether women are, together with men, created in God's image, for the problem underlies our desire to find images or analogies to express what God is 'like'. Feelings about God's 'femaleness' run deep, not least among those whose denominational tradition allows women to be ordained to the ministry. During 1980, there was a heated correspondence in the *Methodist Recorder*, initiated by Dr Brian Wren. He questioned whether we might not enrich our understanding of God by adding female metaphors to the 'overwhelmingly male' images of tradition. Opposition was expressed in a curious way. Frequently a correspondent would, in the same letter, address the issue as both totally unimportant and potentially demonic. In Dr Wren's words, it was

'important enough to get angry about, yet too trivial to be discussed.'

A few people came out strongly for 'essential masculinity', e.g.

'I believe that God should be referred to as 'He' and not as 'She' or 'It' . . . I believe that God has revealed himself in this way because this way expresses the truth about him, and any other way would be a lie.'

But the overall impression was of resistance to opening up the question at all. I think there are two levels to this resistance. One is the stock response, 'Well, God isn't exactly male, but one thing we know for sure, that he is Definitely Not Female! The other, deeper level, is that female images suggest an alternative way of thinking, and thus make it embarrassingly obvious that 'masculinity' could be anthropomorphizing God. We would rather cling to it: we would rather feel that this, at least, is something knowable about God's essential self.

It is only in recent years that I have come to question this resistance in myself, when I discovered that, although the great majority of the Biblical epithets for God are masculine, some startlingly female images are present. In Psalm 22, God is pictured as a caring midwife – in ancient societies, an inevitably female role: (Ps 22:9)

'You drew me out of the womb,  
you entrusted me to my mother's breasts;  
placed on your lap from my birth,

from my mother's womb you have been my God.'

On several occasions, mother-love is referred to as the closest analogy to the endlessly patient and enduring love of God for Israel: (Isa 49: 15)

'Does a woman forget the baby at her breast,  
or fail to cherish the son of her womb?  
Yet even if these forget,  
I will never forget you.'

The Old Testament is tissued with references to God's tenderness and compassion' (Ex 34: 6), and the Hebrew word underlying the translation has strong maternal overtones. It is *rechamim*, whose root, *rechem* literally means 'womb'. Hence God's compassion is the trembling of the womb – a sensation usually much less specifically translated, e.g. in the Jerusalem Bible at Isaiah 63: 15:

'the yearning of your inmost heart'.

It seems that translators are not immune from the conviction that God is Definitely Not Female, as there is at least one case where the Jerusalem Bible offers a suspect rendering rather than seem literally to impute motherhood to God. At Deuteronomy 32: 18, it reads,

'You forget the Rock who begot you,  
unmindful now of the God who fathered you.'

The Hebrew word translated 'begot' is rarely used in the male sense – it also means 'bore'. But the word translated 'fathered' is an exclusively female activity, and is more accurately translated 'who writhed in labour pains with you'. It is a rejected mother speaking.

Other studies have listed and discussed the Biblical heritage of female imagery for God. (e.g. Phyllis Trible, Leonard Swidler, Marianne Katoppo),<sup>5</sup> but I want to concentrate on the feelings such analogies arouse. If they are unsettling, it can make us look carefully again at what we do feel comfortable with. There are various possible problems. One is that an image may be positively unhelpful in our approach to God. For instance, the dearly-loved name of 'Father' may have quite other associations for those whose human fathers were brutal or vicious. One of Brian Wren's correspondents writes, of a 'male' God:

'My childhood experiences of men make it very hard to accept such a God and it is therefore a hindrance to me in my worship and prayer life.'

To the majority of us, whose caring, if humanly fallible fathers were a means to comprehending a heavenly Father, there is an opposite snag – the image may be too comfortable, especially for women. Pauline Webb, in her book, *Where are the Women?* points out that, though a father often provides his sons with a model of

adult responsibility,

'many women never cease to be Daddy's little girl.'<sup>6</sup>

The feelings can easily be transferred to a Father God. In a recent conversation with two other women on this subject, we agreed that the image of God as Mother could be challenging rather than merely soothing. Here is a God who cannot be flirted with, or manipulated – a God who knows us thoroughly and expects us to become full-grown women. To quote another woman, herself an ordinand in the Methodist church:

'I could never understand it when male colleagues became all excited and inspired by the bit in Romans 8 about being 'sons' of God. It left me cold. But then when I translated it into female terms, I suddenly felt included.'

Being a woman, I can only speculate what are the comforts or the dangers for men of traditional imagery. But perhaps one reason why both sexes fear to think of God as Mother is that we were all once totally helpless in the hands of a woman. To grow up has been, partly, a process of getting away from Mum: to think of reverting to an infantile dependence is frightening. We might be engulfed. Feelings towards one's mother are bound to be complicated. For she was (for the vast majority of us) the first person not only to be totally committed to us, the source of all our satisfaction and security, but was also the first to deny us our demands. She could, and did, withhold her power to cherish and feed, and, from a child's point of view, arbitrarily so. She was the object of our most basic yearnings – and the butt of our earliest irritation and fury. Any mother knows that a child reserves its worst behaviour for her. Perhaps we fear that to name our Mother in God would stir some of the painful resentments we would rather not feel towards our creator. God as 'She' could get under our skin.

Another problem, as we saw in Julian of Norwich's image, is the inescapable 'bodiliness' of female experience. Motherhood especially is never free from physical mess – and traditional disgust for carnality, along with our fear of mother's closeness, makes it difficult for us to see in women a model of God's transcendence. Professor E L Mascall, in his book, *Whatever Happened to the Human Mind?* expresses the fear bluntly:

'religions that lack a firmly male image of deity lapse into an immanentism in which the sense of a transcendent Creator is absent, to say nothing of the corresponding nature and fertility rites with the sexual licence which provoked the denunciations of the Hebrew prophets.'<sup>7</sup>

But before we assume that 'masculinity' in God is essential, let us examine the other elements that traditionally inspire a sense of transcendence. There is the image of social distance: God is a King,

and we his subjects, a Master, and we his slaves. There is the image of vastly superior power and force: God is a victorious warlord, 'the Lord mighty in battle'. Interestingly, 'Father' is not among the transcendent images of the Old Testament. It crops up only twice explicitly – though a parental tenderness often mitigates God's righteous judgment. (e.g. Hosea 11: 8-9). But 'Father' is the pervasive name for God in the New Testament, and is clearly one of Jesus' significant shifts of emphasis in our thinking about God. However, its importance as a name for God is precisely not its intimations of fearful power and transcendence; especially in the term 'Abba', it conveys a nearness, an intimacy which may have shocked Jesus' contemporaries. Considering its initial subversiveness, it is ironic to see 'Father' pressed into the service of hierarchy.

Another element to notice in Professor Mascall's argument is the implication that, if we do not preserve a 'firmly male image of deity', then we are choosing a Goddess. If femaleness is to be admitted at all, it will take over altogether. Surely this fear exalts our tendency to mistake image for essence into a theological principle, rather than seeing it as a human failing, to be constantly challenged. Here the power of woman as a source of life (and hence her powerfulness as an image for God) is tacitly admitted, at the same time as her inferiority is insisted upon. (A female God represents an obvious 'lapse'). In our Christian tradition we have dealt with these ambivalent feelings by almost entirely excluding the female as a source of imagery in worship and liturgy. And our tradition supports a plethora of images. A quick glance through the hymn book of any denomination will reveal scores of different epithets for God. Writers have ranged over the resources of the natural world and of human art for analogies: God is pictured as light, as the Sun, as a bottomless abyss, a 'height immense', an unbounded Sea, a Rock; or as a fountain, a hiding-place, a treasury, a shield, a castle. These, of course, are in addition to all the human (male) roles given to God. But you will almost never have the opportunity to sing of God as Mother, as Wife, as Sister, or even (except in the Psalms) as Midwife. Non-human objects may symbolize God's glory, but, by their almost universal absence in this respect, may we conclude that human women cannot?

This is not a plea to replace male images of God with female ones. Images are powerful. They enable us momentarily to grasp the ineffable in terms that we can cope with. They can reveal the ordinariness of our lives and relationships to be vibrant with grace. But they also have the power to shape and limit thought. Culturally reinforced, they can make alternative ways of thinking virtually inaccessible. Of course God as 'She' is a travesty. But so is God as 'He', and I have tried to show that 'He' is the spurious es-

sence that our imaginations cannot let go of. It is spurious because it claims to know what is unknowable. To return to C S Lewis (this time with approval). Late in life, he married a woman who was dying of cancer. During his bereavement, in *A Grief Observed*, he reflects on the fact that he has kept no good photograph of his dead wife. If he had done so, he writes, he might have been tempted to recall and love the resemblance of her, rather than the real woman. This thought has implications for religious 'likenesses' as well:

'Images of the Holy easily become holy images – sacrosanct. My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? . . . And most are 'offended' by the iconoclasm; and blessed are those who are not.'<sup>8</sup>

Biblical references are taken from the Jerusalem Bible.

- 1 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans by Clifton Walters. Penguin 1966, chap 60.
- 2 Quoted in an interview with Polly Toynbee, *The Guardian*, 20 April 1981.
- 3 C S Lewis, 'Priestesses in the Church?' in *God in the Dock, Essays on Theology*, ed Walter Hooper, Fount Books, 1979.
- 4 Augustine, 'On the Holy Trinity', quoted in Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines, *Not in God's Image*, Virago, 1979, p 142.
- 5 Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Philadelphia 1978; Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmation of Woman*, Philadelphia 1979; Marianne Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free*, Geneva, 1979.
- 6 Pauline Webb, *Where are the Women?* Epworth, London, 1979.
- 7 E L Mascall, *Whatever Happened to the Human Mind?* S P C K, 1980, p 150.
- 8 C S Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Faber, London 1966, p 52.

## The Intelligible Universe

Brian Davies O P

*The Intelligible Universe: A Cosmological Argument*, by Hugo Meynell. Macmillan, 1982. pp 153. £15.00

Many philosophers would agree that the Cosmological Argument for the existence of God has been one of the major theistic arguments in the history of philosophy. And some of them actually support it. But ask them to define 'the Cosmological Argument'