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Susan Ross

Loyola University Chicago, [sross@luc.edu](mailto:sross@luc.edu)

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# **To Speak of God in a Feminine Way in the Churches and Theologies of the Americas**

Susan A. Ross

My title – “To speak of God in a feminine way” – allows both a broad and a narrow interpretation. The broader sense of “speaking of God” is, of course, the task of all theology: *logos* about *theos*. St. Anselm’s famous formulation is “*fides quaerens intellectum*”: faith seeking understanding. This is the task of all theologians, who are charged not simply to repeat ecclesiastical formulas but genuinely to explore the significance of our faith in terms that are meaningful to the context of the present day. How we speak of God in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is very different than how our predecessors spoke of God in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The narrower sense deals with language specifically about God. This area too has a long and complicated history. The Patristic debates about the impassibility of God reflected the struggle of theology with Greek ideas of God’s transcendence, also connected to the context of the time. In more recent years, theologians have discussed how our metaphysical ideas are connected with our theology, as we see in Process theology; how the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century affect how we understand the goodness of God or even God’s existence, such as we see in the “Death of God” movement in the 1960’s. Liberation theologians see God as the one who liberates the poor from their oppression, retrieving the biblical sense of God’s solidarity with the Israelites under Egyptian slavery.

Feminist theology, as it is practiced in the Americas, is concerned with both of these senses of “speaking of God”. In this paper, I will address both of these topics from the perspectives of women’s voices in the Americas. My own perspective is that of a feminist: that is, I espouse a perspective that challenges and names as sinful patriarchal modes of thinking and acting as oppressive to women, as well as to non-elite men, children, and the nonhuman world. This perspective seeks to change the situation for greater justice. In addition, I also come from a socially and economically privileged, white, North American context that has itself been identified as oppressive, particularly to Latin America. My aim in this essay is to argue that the voices of feminist women are a necessary part of the church’s conversations, not only in issues related to the family and sexuality, but in all that the church says and does. I will also try to engage the voices of women who do not consider themselves feminist in an effort to be as inclusive as possible.

Let me first expand just a bit on the politics surrounding feminism, which is a word that carries a lot of “baggage,” as we would say in the US. Many of my students, including many young women, find the word off-putting and are reluctant to identify themselves as feminist. For many complex reasons, the term for some suggests angry women who hate men, the family, and seek to be like aggressive men in seizing power. For good reason, young women do not want simply to reverse power dynamics, although it is important to say that this is not what feminism claims to do. And while feminist women are not unanimous in all of their concerns, we do share a conviction that the structures of power in society and in the church all too often work against women. My own choice of “feminist” is in line with Elizabeth Johnson’s understanding of feminist theology: «[it] engages in at least three interrelated tasks: it critically analyzes inherited oppressions, searches for alternative wisdom and suppressed history, and risks new interpretations of the tradition in conversation with women’s lives»<sup>1</sup>.

### Theology as “Speaking of God”

Let me first, briefly, address the broader understanding of what it means “to speak of God in a feminine voice”. First, who is the theologian, the one who “speaks of God”? To draw on David Tracy’s analysis in *The Analogical Imagination*, it is important to identify the social location of the theologian<sup>2</sup>. Until relatively recently in our long history, the Catholic theologian was a celibate male priest, usually white, who taught in a university or more likely a seminary. Only in the last 60 years has Catholic theology, especially in the North American context, moved into university contexts, both secular and church-related. Lay people, among them women, have come to the study of theology and are now full members of theological faculties. We bring our distinct experiences with us, as did those who preceded us. One of the very first women to “speak of God in a feminine way” argued that the ways that sin and grace were typically understood in Christian theology – as pride and self-giving love – largely reflected male experiences – indeed, we could now add, the experiences of privileged, elite men<sup>3</sup>. Women, Valerie Saiving argued, often lacked an adequate sense of self so that admonitions *against* pride and *for* self-

1 E.A. JOHNSON, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, Crossroad, New York, NY 1992, p. 29.

2 D. TRACY, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, Crossroad, New York, NY 1982, especially Chapter 1: “A Social Portrait of the Theologian”, pp. 3-46.

3 V. SAIVING, *The Human Situation: A Feminine View*, “The Journal of Religion” XL (1960), 2, 100-112; see also J. PLASKOW, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women’s Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich*, University Press of America, Washington, DC 1980.

sacrificial love served to maintain women's sense of inferiority and perpetuated both a spirituality and a theology that worked against women's full psychological and spiritual development. More often than not – and in the context of 1960, even more so than the present – women lacked a sufficient sense of their own worth, doubted themselves, and also tended to be overly self-sacrificial in their relationships with self and others. While her examples may not be as relevant in the present day, the larger point is that theology must take into account context and experience. Since the early years of feminist theology, much has been written and said about the diversity of women's experiences across race, class, and ethnicity. Womanist (reflecting African-American women) and *Mujerista* (reflecting Latin American women) theologies have developed with a focus on the value of continuing struggle in the midst of oppression<sup>4</sup>. In fact, womanist theologians like Delores Williams have criticized Black male theologians for their focus on liberation, when the situation of women often is less indicative of liberation than of continuing struggle.

A second point on the broader topic “speaking of God” has to do with the relation between theory and praxis. If we are to consider feminist theologies as liberation theology – which I do – then it is essential for feminist theology to be accountable to the least among us: one might say this is a variation on Latin American liberation theology's “preferential option for the poor”. While feminist theology is practiced in academia, its audience is not just academic feminist women, but also our male colleagues and especially the women and men among whom we live – our families and communities. Feminist theology aims to give a voice to women's hopes and desires for relationship with the divine, for the struggle for justice in the world, and for our spiritual and liturgical expressions<sup>5</sup>.

What this means is that feminist theology is not simply an activity of the academy or the church, directed inwardly and focused on greater intellectual understanding. There is, of course, an inward dimension to the theological task, as the theologian herself is reflecting on her experience in response to divine revelation. The point is that feminist theology aims at liberation from oppression: it has an active and dynamic goal. An anecdote from my own academic experience will help to illustrate this point. As a young faculty member, I was evaluated after three years in my position by a committee of senior faculty members, whose task was to ascertain whether I should be continued and to help guide me towards a successful application for tenure. By the time of

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4 See D.S. WILLIAMS, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 1995 and A.M. ISÁSI-DÍAZ, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 1996.

5 See JOHNSON, *She Who Is*, p. 244.

this evaluation, I had published a few articles in scholarly journals and books, but I had also contributed to “popular” (that is, addressed to lay people, not other academics) journals in language that was intended to be accessible. I was criticized by the committee for my “lack of scholarly seriousness”. While I challenged the idea that one could not do both, it was clear to me that in order for me to succeed as a young professor, I had to make sure that my subsequent publications were only directed toward academic audiences.

My point is that feminist theologians seek not simply to be successful academics, but also to make a difference in people’s lives. Feminist theology is an *engaged* academic and churchly endeavor that does not accept a complete breach between the daily lives of Christians and those of theologians.

### To Speak of God in a Feminine Way

Now I would like to turn to the more specific topic of “speaking of God in a feminine way”. I will draw on the ideas of the US theologian Elizabeth Johnson and the Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara. We theologians are all aware of the limitations of our language in relation to God. As the great Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, relying on Aquinas, so often emphasized, God is ultimately incomprehensible<sup>6</sup>. Our language for God is our feeble way of expressing, in words, what cannot ever be adequately said. In the last three years in the US, this issue has received much attention through the controversy over Elizabeth Johnson’s book *Quest for the Living God*. Her 1992 book *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* undertook a retrieval of the language of wisdom from scripture and early Christian writing. She argued that the dominance of male language for God has resulted in the idea that men are more like God than women. Her more constructive effort was to say that our language for God has to be more multivalent in its efforts to communicate the divine mystery as it is manifest throughout creation, and that women, no less than men, are created in God’s image. Speaking of *She Who Is*, Johnson writes «...is necessary if speech about God is to shake off the shackles of idolatry and be a blessing for women...naming God in this way is a gleam of light on the road to genuine community»<sup>7</sup>. Johnson’s aim was to make the connection between speech about God and human, specifically women’s, flourishing. The normative language for God as male has, she argued, become idolatrous: «In sum, literal patriarchal speech about God is

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6 «God, however, as considered in Himself, is altogether one and simple, yet our intellect knows Him by different conceptions because it cannot see Him as He is in Himself». THOMAS AQUINAS, *ST I*, q. 13, a. 12. See K. RAHNER, *Thomas Aquinas on the Incomprehensibility of God*, “Journal of Religion” LVIII (1978), 107-125.

7 JOHNSON, *She Who Is*, p. 243.

both oppressive and idolatrous»<sup>8</sup>. What is needed is «...extended theological speaking about God in female images, or long draughts of this new wine [as] a condition for the very possibility of equivalent imaging of God in religious speech»<sup>9</sup>.

In her more recent book *Quest*, which is basically a survey of contemporary writings on God – and surprisingly, in connection with the US Bishops' Committee on Doctrine statement, somewhat less creative in its scope – she develops further some of the ideas from her earlier work. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine took issue with many of the ideas expressed in the book. In their statement, the bishops write that «her language about God does not adequately reflect the faith of the Church»<sup>10</sup>. Johnson's critique of "classical theism", her comment, referencing Rahner, that «much of what people hear in the preaching and teaching of the church draws on a primitive idea of God unworthy of belief» and particularly her assertion that «there is no one such name» totally worthy of God drew especially harsh words from the Committee<sup>11</sup>. In her own defense, she writes that «In fact what I have done is bring forth from scripture some precious images of God, long-neglected, but filled with the potential of revealing the saving love of God»<sup>12</sup>.

The Committee focused on her use of metaphor and analogy and charged that in her understanding of the term, no real understanding of God is ever possible: «With such repeated negation, however, the book fails to recognize that analogy expresses some kind of knowledge of God. We must have at least some understanding of the concept that we are affirming of God for there to be an analogy»<sup>13</sup>. The Committee also affirmed the revelatory nature of calling God "Father", challenged her understanding of "classical theism", and made a number of other critical observations dealing specifically with God's ability to suffer along with God's transcendence.

Johnson's lengthy response constitutes almost a primer in theology itself and is worth a careful reading. In her conclusion, she writes: «Insofar as the book presents glimpses of God emerging out of the religious belief and practice, suffering and study of groups of people struggling to live out their faith today, the retrievals presented are actually signaling something new going forward in the living tradition, 'toward the fullness of divine truth' (DV 8)». What I

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> See USCCB *Statement*, at <http://www.usccb.org/news/2011/11-205e.cfm> (accessed March 13, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Johnson's extensive response to the Committee on Doctrine's statement can be found at <http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/johnson-letter-us-bishops-doctrine-committee> (accessed March 13, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>13</sup> USCCB, *Statement*, pp. 3-4.

would emphasize for the purposes of this essay are two points: first, that feminist theology is perceived to be highly threatening to hierarchical authorities in Catholicism and in need of strong negative response<sup>14</sup>; second, that feminist theologians such as Johnson see their situation as developing creative responses to the challenges of the time. While this space does not allow for a more complex discussion about this controversy, suffice it to say here that Johnson's effort to expand theological and liturgical language for God and the passions that it arose is an indication of the seriousness of this kind of theological work.

Let me now turn to the work of Ivone Gebara, who has also been a subject of hierarchical investigation for her theological views, having been silenced by the CDF in 1995 and ordered to spend two years in re-education in France. She subsequently returned to Brazil and has continued her ministry and writing, now with a strong focus on ecofeminism. Gebara's work draws intentionally on the experiences of poor women, among whom she has spent years working. Unlike Johnson, her main focus is not primarily gendered language for God – although it is definitely a concern – but rather the awareness that so many poor women call on God in their sense of abandonment by society and by the church. In a chapter entitled "God for Women" in her book *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, she writes, «The God of poor women shows his face in the transitory and in the life at home. He is a God called upon to make life go on, especially in domestic matters»<sup>15</sup>. She goes on to note that «this is the theology not considered important...» since it does not deal with weighty issues but «even little weak ones» that are close to the experiences of ordinary women<sup>16</sup>. Her point is that women, who constitute most of the poor, do not question the existence of God but rather recognize that God «does not give answers to theoretical questions» and that God «simply sustains life, is in life, is in us at every moment»<sup>17</sup>.

Yet she later observes that «...all our ideas, including our ideas of God, are distinguished by the cultural and social dynamics of gender»<sup>18</sup>. In her review

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14 As of this writing (May 30, 2014), the Leadership Council of Women Religious (LCWR) has remained under severe criticism by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for its choice of Johnson to receive an award at their annual meeting in Summer 2014. See [http://www.doctrinafidei.va/muller/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20140430\\_muller-lcwr\\_en.html](http://www.doctrinafidei.va/muller/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20140430_muller-lcwr_en.html) (accessed May 30, 2014), especially the comment by Cardinal Müller: «It saddens me to learn that you have decided to give the Outstanding Leadership Award during this year's Assembly to a theologian criticized by the Bishops of the United States because of the gravity of the doctrinal errors in that theologian's writings. This is a decision that will be seen as a rather open provocation against the Holy See and the Doctrinal Assessment. Not only that, but it further alienates the LCWR from the Bishops as well».

15 I. GEBARA, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, Trans. A.P. WARE, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2002 [French original: *Le mal au féminin*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1999], p. 149.

16 *Ivi.*

17 *Ivi.*

18 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

of male Latin American liberation theologians, she points out that «With [the] lens of gender, we note how strictly patriarchal theology has limited the concept of God to a male point of view, even while believing that it has achieved a more universal vision...»<sup>19</sup>. She goes on to say that «for critical feminist theology the problem is not the fact that Jesus is a man, a part of his own historic identity, but that this man continues even today to be proclaimed the Only Son of God, Savior, and God Himself. In other words, culture has insisted on the male character of salvation, even if other approaches could be developed, approaches also contained in our tradition»<sup>20</sup>. One of these approaches is that of Wisdom, on which Johnson also draws. Gebara offers the term “*esse-diversity*” as a way of approaching how we might speak of God. “*Esse-diversity*” builds on the varied richness of created life, relatedness to all that exists, and specifically nonhierarchical ways of seeing the world; it carries with it an openness to new discourses about God, Christ, and community.

Both Johnson and Gebara emphasize that their goal is to *expand* our language for God, not simply to discard any male language. In doing this they seek two things: the first is a more acute awareness of the effects of our traditional language about God. As Johnson repeats throughout *She Who Is*, “the symbol of God *functions*”; that is, our language about God has a profound effect on how we see ourselves and the world and how we relate with each other<sup>21</sup>. While one might dispute the accuracy of her picture of the “God of classical theism”, I believe she is correct in pointing out how an exclusively male image of God suggests that women are somehow less than fully *imago Dei*. The second point that these two theologians share is a critique of hierarchical domination: of men over women, of humanity over creation: in short, a critique of all forms of oppression. This oppression can be linguistic, as in language about God; it can be political, as in women’s lack of access to positions where our voices can be heard and not defined for us by others; it can be spiritual, when one is unable to see oneself as created in God’s image.

Clearly, speaking of God in a feminine voice raises a number of profound questions. I would further suggest that at the heart of these two critiques is a concern that our images and language for God need to be ever aware of the tendency to petrification, even idolatry, and that women’s experiences of God need to be heard in their own voices, that these experiences are not always filtered through the voices of men. The church needs to acknowledge and repent of the fact that its language and images of God are overwhelmingly masculine and that this has done harm to women as well as men. Yet here I also

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19 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

21 JOHNSON, *She Who Is*, p. 6.



need to acknowledge that not all women consider themselves feminist in the sense that I am using and that many embrace the gender complementarity that has been characteristic of official Catholic statements on women, especially under the papacy of John Paul II.

### The Complementarity of Men and Women

In recent months, we have heard Pope Francis use the language of sexual complementarity, particularly when he speaks of the Petrine and Marian principles of the church<sup>22</sup>. Another way of expressing this is through “nuptial” or “spousal” images of God and creation, Christ and the Church, male and female<sup>23</sup>. This language was one of the central points of the papacy of St. John Paul II, and continues to have a powerful influence in the church.

This theology, sometimes known as “the Theology of the Body,” sees male and female as equally created in the image of God, but with distinct and essentially different natures. The human dimensions of creativity, initiative, and leadership are associated with the masculine and the maternal, nurturing, and receptive dimensions are associated with the feminine<sup>24</sup>. “Women’s nature” is seen to lie in these qualities, which derive from women’s “essentially maternal” nature, given to us by God. By taking embodiment seriously, this “theology of the body” understands these essential differences to be intended by God for different tasks for women and men in society and in the church. I am assuming that these points are familiar to most informed Catholic laypeople. There is a natural-law dimension to this understanding of the relationship of embodiment to spirituality (although I would hesitate to characterize it as a natural law theology), in that it takes embodiment seriously; it offers a genuine alternative to the ways that human sexuality has been trivialized and turned into a mere function of pleasure and reproduction in contemporary consumer society; and it offers a way of valuing women for their “unique” gifts in a church with a long record of not recognizing women’s contributions. While this is a theology that I personally find problematic, it is embraced by many and appears to be the approach that Pope Francis is taking<sup>25</sup>.

22 See the transcript of Pope FRANCIS’ interview with FERRUCCIO DE BORTOLI, chief editor of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*: <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/transcript-pope-francis-march-5-interview-with-corriere-della-sera/> (accessed June 16 2014).

23 See JOHN PAUL II, *Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, Pauline Books, Boston, MA 1997.

24 See *Id.*, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 1988.

25 For my own critique see S.A. Ross, *The Bridegroom and the Bride: The Theological Anthropology of John Paul II and its Relation to Homosexuality*, in P.B. JUNG – J.A. CORAY (eds.), *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology*, “A Michael Glazier book”, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2001.

I must acknowledge as well that the language of Bridegroom and Bride is very ancient language, predating even the Hebrew scriptures, used in both the Jewish and Christian scriptures (although not without many problems to this feminist), and with a long history in Christian spirituality. This language and set of metaphors is not likely to disappear. As we hear from the voices of women in Brazil, the maleness of God is not their primary concern. But what is of concern to all women is the suggestion in this metaphor that women are not made fully in the image of God, who is always exclusively Bridegroom, where women are always exclusively Bride.

Let me suggest a few observations on this ancient trope. The idea of a spousal relationship between God and humanity has, at its best, intended to convey a passionate love and intimacy between the divine and creation. One can see in biblical accounts how God's enduring and indeed passionate love for humanity, and humanity's for God, finds eloquent expression in spousal language. But there are also problems with this language. One is that the sinfulness of humanity, within this metaphor, is often portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures in the language of harlotry and prostitution. These specifically "female" forms of sin, in using women as prime examples, whether intended or not, demonize women and often draw on violent images of retribution that can seem to validate domestic violence<sup>26</sup>. Granted, all of Israel, men and women together, are seen in these terms, but the feminine metaphor continues the theme of women's distinctive sinfulness as symbolic of all sinfulness.

A second observation, more relevant to the present, is that the feminine is consistently used to symbolize the human and the masculine is consistently used to symbolize the divine. Men *and* women, as in the biblical examples, are the "bride", the feminine and receptive in relation to the "bridegroom". Thus men have the capacity to imagine themselves as *both* bride and bridegroom. But with the dynamics of this metaphor, women are always and only brides: only receptive, never leading, never fully in the *imago Dei* as long as the spousal metaphor is the leading metaphor for gender relations. When God is always Bridegroom, when men are both bridegroom and bride, but when women are only bride, women are not fully *imago Dei*.

I am not suggesting that this metaphor be totally rejected; rather, my point is that we emphasize the love and dynamism of the relationship and not absolutize its gendered dimensions. Indeed, the amazingly rapid development of marriage equality around the globe (that is, marriage rights for gays and lesbians as well as heterosexual couples) seems to underscore the continuing

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<sup>26</sup> See among many studies on this topic, J.A. SCHROEDER, *Dinah's Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2007; R.J. WEEMS, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 1995.

meaningfulness of spousal relationships in the present and under circumstances that biblical writers would have found quite simply unbelievable. In my own experience of over 20 years of married life, initiative and receptivity are not isolated by gender<sup>27</sup>. And in relation to the wider church, and the church's concern to hear the experiences of marriage and family life from around the world, an emphasis on "essential" male and female qualities is bound to run into the ways that different cultures understand gender roles, how gender roles have changed and continue to change. Neither scientists nor theologians have fully plumbed the depths of the roles of nature and nurture when it comes to gender relations. There is much we still do not know about how our brains and psyches respond to hormones and cultural practices. I tend to take what some of my colleagues have termed a "revised natural law" approach to this point, but do not have the time or space to elaborate on it more fully here. I will just note that such an approach recognizes how the so-called "natural" and "cultural" intersect in complex ways<sup>28</sup>.

To conclude: to be able to speak of God fully in a feminine voice in the churches and theologies of the Americas is only possible when we can be open to the richness and unfathomable mystery of God as it experienced in the lives of women as well as men, when women can break open the scriptures within Christian communities and share their own understandings of God's love, mercy, and justice, and when we can envisage God as both our Mother and our Father, our loving Spouse and our Friend, who can never be fully encompassed within our paltry words, but whose mystery and generosity is always coming to life in new ways.

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<sup>27</sup> See my essay S.A. Ross, *Can God be a Bride?*, at <http://americamagazine.org/issue/502/article/can-god-be-bride> (accessed June 16 2014).

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, L.S. CAHILL, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996.