

The Image of God in the Christian Mission

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The most important question about a church is the image of God it presents to people as a guide for worship. The nature of that image is the key to its mission—far more determinative of its mission than the oft-discussed questions of money, personnel, policies and practices.

Reference to the image of God here is made in terms of the broad meaning of the word “image.” It includes what is meant by “concept,” by “idea.” It includes the elements that call for emotional reaction. The importance of such images of God, across history, is self-evident. The persistent power of certain kinds of images is evident in Hinduism, Islam, in many religious cults, as well as the picture of God in Jesus Christ. It is just because images of God have such profound influence upon human existence that evangelism is important, and that the work of the Church has a significance far beyond its own institutional life.

The image, of course, is never the reality. The Holy Spirit again and again breaks through the image to bring persons into encounter with the living God. That breakthrough, however, is the work of the Holy Spirit. The human task is to present people with an image of God as close as possible to the reality. No question is more critical regarding the nature of the Christian mission than the image of God, which it presents to people as a guide for worship.

The central element in worship is the adoration of God. Adoration of God is an act of the total person. At its fullest, it sets memories, both recent and remote, into creative context. It touches every motive, conscious and unconscious. It reshapes affections and hostilities; joys and guilt. A basic need of persons is for the kind of God revealed in Jesus Christ—whom to know is gladly and trustingly to live all one's life in offering

to him. Out of such adoration confession comes of itself. Whatever is unacceptable to a God so adored is unacceptable. Out of such adoration, intercession comes of itself. To sense the love of God is eagerly to pour out one's own love. Out of such adoration, commitment comes of itself.

The decisive experience of a Christian is the adoration of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. The prime task of the Church is to prepare the way for such adoration. The most important piece of "equipment" which the Church has for mission is the image of God, which it presents as a guide for worship.

The central plea of this paper is that we as Christians seek to present an image of God, which is responsive to the fullness of human need, and faithful to the full potential of Scripture. Human beings need an image of God inclusive of both the father and the mother; of both the male and the female. To worship an exclusively father image of God is always to some degree a spiritual impoverishment. Each one of us is the product of both a mother and a father. The pattern of childhood relationships in almost every culture means that each human being is even more a product of the mother than of the father. The elements in our lives, which are shaped under feminine influence, are even more powerfully dynamic and deeply motivating than those, which came out of masculine influence. To worship in image of God which is exclusively masculine is to insulate enormously powerful elements in our motivations from the redemptive touch of such worship.

When I was a pastor in Jersey City, a boy very active in our church, and deeply committed to its faith, became engaged to a lovely Roman Catholic girl. This was long before the days of Vatican Council II. The couple talked with her priest and they came to talk to me. The girl's first question to me was, "Do you worship the Virgin Mary?" As a Roman Catholic, she was supposed to say, "venerate," instead of "worship," but her meaning was plain. When I said we did not, the question for her was settled. She could not become a Protestant. As I thought of her family, I felt myself that she should not become a Protestant. Her father was a drunkard and a sadist whose debauches unleashed vicious cruelty toward his wife and his children. Her mother was a strong, warm person. She was a source of the strength and of the security of all the children. The dynamic center of that girl's faith was her adoration of the "Mother of God." To try to worship the exclusively masculine, father image of God presented in most Protestant churches would have been for that girl psychologically disintegrating and spiritually destructive.

She came often to my mind when I later read Father Considine's book, "Call for Forty Thousand." Part of the book is a survey of Roman Catholicism in Latin America, country by country. A repeated theme is the strength, which Roman Catholicism draws from the feeling of people about the Virgin Mary. I do not personally believe that the Roman Catholic treatment of Mary as an object of veneration is an adequate answer to human need. However, the enormous power in human lives exerted by the appeal of Mary in many nations is a sign of desperate need, which we Protestants have ignored too long.

If we are to be responsive to that need, we must ask to what degree the Scripture permits the presentation of an image of God inclusive of both the mother and the father, both the masculine and the feminine.

The Genesis story of creation is a story in which the totality of the creative power is contained within Jahweh. He had no paramour. Jahweh was not dependent upon another creature to perform the act of creation. At this point, the Genesis story of creation differs sharply from the great majority of the Semitic creation myths in which the primal act of creation was conceived as a bi-sexual act.

In Genesis 1:27, we read, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." In Semitic villages the ruler often placed an image of himself. It was to be a reminder to the people of the identity of the ruler. In this sense, both men and women are images of God, reminders of his character.

Throughout the Old Testament, references to Jahweh in a personal pronoun are always masculine. Jahweh is always referred to as "he." There was a justified fear of the fertility cult in which the female form was used for erotic excitement and a stimulus to sexual debauchery. However, the image of Jahweh in the Old Testament is not exclusively masculine. The feelings of Jahweh are frequently described in words in the female form. The "mercy" of Jahweh is described in using the word for the "womb" of Jahweh. There are suggestions in Scripture that the work of the Holy Spirit is feminine, not least the treatment by Paul in the book of Romans of the Spirit as the life-giver.

The affirmation of the virgin birth is, in part, an echoing of the record of the primal act of creation. In the primal act of creation, the total possibility for creation of life was contained within Jahweh alone. In Matthew's treatment of the birth of Jesus Christ, Mary was not dependent upon a masculine human being to become the Mother of God. Neither

the primal act of creation nor the incarnation was dependent upon bisexual activity.

Paul Minear has made it clear in his illuminating book on *The Revelation of John* that that book was in its first form a litany for worship. The relationship of the male and the female as objects of adoration, as presented in that book, is illuminating. The male, in the figure of Christ, is presented for adoration. The female, as the Mother of Christ, is presented for adoration. At the same time, the male is presented as a sign of evil, in the figure of Satan, and the female is presented as a sign of evil, in the figure of the whore of Babylon. From the point of view of human dynamics in worship the illuminating element in this picture is that both male and female are kept in relationships to each other, both for adoration and for rejection.

The key to our image of God is, of course, the figure of Jesus Christ. In every culture, there are certain qualities which are considered male, and certain which are considered female. Cultures contrast dramatically in the attribution of “maleness” or “femaleness” to certain qualities. Nevertheless, in every culture, this contrast is maintained. Jesus Christ himself vividly demonstrated, as measured by the culture of his day, traits which were there considered to be both masculine and feminine. In volcanic wrath he cleansed the temple, but he was so sensitive to human contact that he detected the distinctive meaning of the touch upon his garment of the woman with the issue of blood. He launched scathing attacks upon the religious leaders of his time, and also wept publicly over Jerusalem. In the range of the human qualities he showed, there was a fullness with which every human being can identify.

Orthodoxy has succeeded more than either Roman Catholicism or Protestantism in remaining faithful both the possibilities of scripture and the nature of human need, in its imagery of God. Orthodoxy has lived on the vitality of its worship. When Kenneth Scott Latourette, in his seven volumes *History of the Expansion of Christianity* describes the movement of Orthodoxy from Byzantium north into Russia and east into Siberia, he describes its patterns of worship. In the long centuries under Islam in the Middle East, and in the fifty years of testing under communism in Russia, the strength upon which Orthodoxy has lived has been the vitality of its patterns of worship.

Part of the reason for that vitality is the treatment in Orthodox theology of the “Theotokos,” the Mother of God. In the dynamics of its worship, Mary and Christ are presented always in relationship to each

other. In the *ikonostasis* within every Orthodox Church, the two central figures are those of Christ and Mary. They are of the same size. They are of the same kind of decoration. These are the central human images in every Orthodox church. In every human being, there is an ambivalent admixture of hostility and affection toward both the masculine and the feminine; toward both the father image and the mother image. The Orthodox juxtaposition of Christ and Mary as images for adoration is profoundly healthy, by every psychotherapeutic standard. The imagery of the Orthodox *ikonostasis* holds the masculine and feminine in constant inter-relationship. Thus, ambivalent feelings of hate and love toward both the masculine and the feminine or toward either, are kept in healthy inter-action. To the degree that imagery affects worship, and that effect is profound, this is the kind of inter-relationship, which is productive for human health.

One of the basic problems of human beings is that few know what to do about their own inner feelings. Many are far more threatened by their own inner hatreds than by hatreds directed against them. Many are profoundly puzzled what to do about their own affections, which may come to surface in ways that are tabooed by their particular society. If worship is to be both liberating and unifying, as it can be in its fullness, then the image presented for worship must be one, which deals with both the masculine and the feminine. In the major traditions of the Christian faith, there is no better example of imagery, which facilitates healing, and unity than the relationship of Christ and the Theotokos in the Orthodox *ikonostasis*.

The tragedy in the Roman Catholic dynamics of worship is in the isolation of the sexes from each other. In many Roman Catholic churches, the contrast between the masculine and the feminine figure is tragically distorted. Christ is seen as an emasculated, suffering, dying figure upon the cross. This image of the masculine is a person to whom things are being done, the passive sufferer. There may be the image of the masculine as the happy and healthy child, innocent and untouched by the world—the Christmas baby. There is occasionally an image of God the creator, terrifying in majesty and power.

In many Roman Catholic churches the one truly human image is that of Mary. She is a full-bodied human creature. Here is a symbolism for worship, which capitalizes upon and sometimes exploits, the need of persons for feminine imagery in worship, but quite fails to keep it in balanced relationship with the masculine. This tragedy in Roman Catholicism may well result from the fact that Roman Catholic theology

has for centuries been decided upon by persons of one sex, committed to a hard line on the separation of the sexes. One of the tragedies of celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church has been the resultant distortion of theology about sex. Orthodoxy has been protected from this tragedy by the fact that its village priests were married, and its theologians have been oftentimes laymen who are married. Thus, Orthodoxy has been able to maintain a far more healthy awareness of the meaning of sexuality, and of the dynamics of imagery in worship.

A tragedy in Protestantism is that our image of God is shaped so strongly by our reaction against the Catholic treatment of Mary. As a matter of fact, the effective imagery presented to lead Protestants to worship is primarily an authoritarian Northern European Teutonic father-God, touched with flecks of mercy. The one-sidedness of the imagery, which we Protestants present for worship is, a tragic obstacle to our part in the Christian mission. It presents an almost insuperable roadblock to ministry within some cultures. The one-sidedness of its imagery is no less a tragic limitation in the worship of those who do become Protestants. We who were born and raised in Protestant churches are often partly impoverished in worship because of the one-sided masculinity in our imagery of God.

We Protestants face questions of driving urgency. How much do we really care about worship? That is to say, how much do we really care about people? How much do we really care about finding an image of God, which points the whole life of persons toward a God who is the complete Person?

What steps can we take in search of such an image? Protestantism has no *ikonostasis*, as does Orthodoxy. Impoverished in the use of other imagery about God, the most influential imagery, which Protestantism uses, unconsciously, about the nature of God is in the kind of people whom it commissions to speak for God. In most of our churches, in spite of pious protestations to the contrary, only men are expected to be able to perform that function. Episcopacy and pulpit, professorial chair and superintendancy, these are occupied only or almost exclusively by one sex. The effective imagery, which we put before people of those able to represent God, is an exclusively masculine image. That imagery will not be corrected, a healing relationship between the sexual images in worship will not be established in Protestantism until the places of visible and conspicuous leadership are open to persons on the basis of ability rather than sex.

Such an action alone will not solve all the problems of the church. There is not any evidence that women bishops will do any better than men bishops. Fundamental questions as to the work of the church and the nature of its mission will remain. Even the provision of an adequate imagery of God for worship will not solve all the problems of the mission. The sense of vital mission has been tragically absent from many Orthodox churches for recent centuries. This paper is not intended as presentation of a “cure-all” for the Christian mission. The paper is only a reminder that the core of the Christian mission is in the image of God that we present as a guide for worship and a plea that we might present an image more adequate to the nature of God and to the need of human beings.

Is there any possibility that such an image might be discovered? No new pattern of theological studies alone will produce it or the insertion of new words into ancient liturgies. Many new initiatives may be needed. One is a change in fundamental attitude within church administration toward persons of different sexes. As a masculine churchmen, I can describe the repentance that is required of masculine churchmen. We must repent of our concealed but real desire that the role of women in the church should be to enlarge our congregations, increase our offerings, and provide us who speak with praise. Equal repentance probably is required of women in the church. Perhaps only a woman can describe what that repentance should be.

Can such a change come about? It is just possible that it might. The impact of technology upon culture is both liberalizing and dehumanizing. People are being released from the stereotyped roles, which formerly were expected of whites and blacks, of men and women, of old and young, of those in every category. Both the relationships between and the boundaries of human groupings are being fundamentally altered. The church is just one of the institutions being profoundly shaken. Perhaps church women and churchmen may be shaken deeply enough that our own pattern of relations as human beings may be brought into the new kind of health and wholeness which may enable us to present to persons for their guide in worship, an image of God which is adequate to their needs and to the nature of God.

FOOTNOTE: A presentation of this theme led to a discussion as to the reason for the comparative strengths of Roman Catholicism, “mainline” Protestantism, and Pentecostalism in the Latin American world. It was pointed out that the Latin ideal of “machismo,” of masculine

virility, is not only absent from the imagery of God in the Roman Catholic church, but is denied by the visible imagery. The passive, emasculated, drooping masculine figure on the cross is in effect a pictorial denial of the real masculinity of Christ. It is no wonder that the absence of men from Roman Catholic worship is so conspicuous. It was also pointed out that while mainline Protestantism present a very different image of God, its congregations in Latin America are also overwhelmingly feminine. It was further pointed out that the one Christian movement in Latin America with consistently strong masculine leadership in congregations is the Pentecostal. It seems to appeal to men far more than either Roman Catholicism or classical Protestantism. Speculation was offered as to the meaning of *glossolalia* in this regard. In the Latin American home, the boy is expected to stand up and talk “like a man” to his father. He is expected to turn to his mother with his feelings and emotions. To many “speaking in tongues” is the “feeling” worship of God—the pouring out of one’s feelings incoherently and deeply, as a boy dares to cry to his mother. The elements causing Pentecostal vitality in Latin America are many. This permissiveness of the kind of emotion which Latin American men are expected to show only to their mother may be a part of the reason for Pentecostal vitality. It seems clear that the capacity of any Christian movement in Latin America to lead people into an affectual human society will depend in part upon the development of a much more healthful and integrative imagery of the nature of God.



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