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# ON CALLING GOD 'MOTHER'

William Harper

Patricia Altenbernd Johnson argues that referring to God in female terms is desirable in that it would help overcome patriarchy, bring to our image of God positive qualities missing when God is referred to in male terms, and would be more inclusive. I find that Johnson's notion of patriarchy is such that overcoming it involves introducing pantheistic elements into Christian belief. Also, Johnson's arguments assume an objectionable stereotype of maleness. The argument from inclusiveness is not supported by observation. Concluding that Johnson's arguments fail, I suggest that Biblical example is sufficient permission for referring to God exclusively in male terms.

In her article "Feminist Christian Philosophy?," Patricia Altenbernd Johnson argues in favor of referring to God in female terms, at least as mixed with male terms.<sup>1</sup> Johnson's advocacy of the use of female terms for God is based on assertions that certain advantages would result from the practice. One alleged advantage is that the use of female terms for God would emphasize positive traits that are de-emphasized by the use of male terms, thus allowing our awareness of God to be more positive and emotionally complete. In support of this claim Johnson presents at length the claims of Sara Ruddick that the notions of preservation, growth, and social acceptability are especially tied to maternal activity.<sup>2</sup> Johnson then claims that each of these attributes is expressed, for example, by the term 'Mother-God.' The term 'Mother-God' expresses the idea that God's power is not so much "total control" but a preserving love, "a hopeful and supportive presence to help us face and cope with our lives."<sup>3</sup> 'Mother-God' stands for "ways of thinking that help the mother and child grow and change." This specifically includes the practice of story-telling.<sup>4</sup> 'Mother-God' also supposedly calls to mind the training of children "to be the kind of person others can accept and whom the mothers themselves can actively appreciate."<sup>5</sup>

The main problem with this claim is that there is nothing especially maternal about any of these practices. Consider the "preserving love" Johnson mentions. For millennia, fathers have protected their children while teaching them how to take care of themselves, warning them against dangers, and teaching them how to confront and deal with unavoidable dangers in appropriate ways. Johnson ignores this role completely. Instead, she makes these characteristics primarily maternal, and contrasts them against the supposedly



paternal notion of power as "total control." She argues similarly with regard to the notions of psychological growth and training in social acceptability, as though the paternal role had little to do with socialization or psychological growth. In turn, Johnson's paternal God is cold and impersonal, and relates to us through power and control, not love. Johnson's view of the paternal God seems to be based on a deficient and arid view of fatherhood.

If Ruddick is, indeed, the origin of these views, we can trace Johnson's mistake. For Ruddick, 'mother' and 'Father' are not gender indexed terms.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Ruddick advocates that males become mothers, that all parents be mothers.

Fathers, historically, are meant to provide material support for child care and to defend mothers and their children from external threat. They are supposed to represent the 'world—its language, culture, work, and rule—and to be the arbiters of the child's acceptability in the world they represent. ...The point about—or against—Fathers is that their authority is not earned by care and indeed undermines the maternal authority that is so earned. ...Fatherhood is more a role determined by cultural demands than a kind of work determined by children's needs. ...The point against Fatherhood is that it offers unrealistic hopes and burdens to women and men who take up the caring labor of maternity. ...Male (or female) parents who have enjoyed or been burdened by the ideology of Fatherhood can and should take up the work of mothering instead.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, motherhood is characterized by Ruddick as a rich, emotionally nuanced institution. In fact, it becomes clear in her text that motherhood includes providing for the material well-being of the child and raising the child to be adapted to a demanding world—actions appropriate to Fatherhood as Ruddick characterizes it. Now, any author has leeway to define terms as he or she wishes. If we accept Ruddick's characterizations of Fatherhood and motherhood as definitions of those roles, then *of course* we would want all parents to be mothers. We would hope no parent is so emotionally vacant as to limit himself or herself to a role as arid as the Fatherhood described by Ruddick. Ruddick goes on in her book to make many excellent and subtle points about parenting (she calls it 'mothering'). However, outside the context of the book we should revert to using terms in their accustomed senses, and in the real world 'fatherhood' refers to the roles played by real fathers in all their rich diversity. It is true that fatherhood has traditionally involved a responsibility to be the primary bread-winner, but to define 'fatherhood' as being limited to this and a few other functions would be no better than to define 'motherhood' as being limited to changing diapers and cooking food.

In this context Johnson also cites Sallie McFague's assertion that referring to God as 'Mother' "could facilitate the experience of god [sic] as intimate and caring."<sup>8</sup> Of course, referring to God as 'Mother' could not enhance our experience of these qualities unless referring to God as 'Father' had somehow

failed to include these qualities. Such a view is simply a distorted caricature of the paternal role. There is no need to begin using female terms for God if the sole purpose of doing so is to import such positive notions as preserving love, growth, and socialization. All of these qualities are fully expressed in the term 'father.' To deny that is simply to resort to a narrow stereotype of male parenthood. If paternity were what Johnson thinks it is, we would have a reason in favor of supplementing it with maternal notions. But the problem is with Johnson's perception of fatherhood, not with the genuine connotations of the word 'father.'

Another benefit Johnson sees in the adoption of female terms for God is the assistance it would lend to the destruction of patriarchy. 'Patriarchy' can mean, 'domination by men,' and that seems to be Johnson's use of the term. Evidently, the use of female terms for God would advance a non-dualistic eco-holism—the view that the integrity of nature is the supreme ethical value—which would in turn involve the demise of patriarchy. Here Johnson cites Rosemary Ruether: "Ruether suggests that using the name 'God/ess' would help us overcome the dualism of nature and spirit."<sup>9</sup> Ruether's program for overcoming this dualism is to combine the transcendence of God with a full measure of immanence. This importation of the divine into nature should, she thinks, result in an elevated valuation of nature and the adoption of the belief that humans must subordinate their interests to nature. According to Ruether, we must see our possession of intelligence as laying upon us "the responsibility and necessity to convert our intelligence to the earth."<sup>10</sup> Ruether implies in her work that nature is good and that human influence is typically detrimental.

There is virtually no place on the planet where one can go to find "nature untouched by human hands." Even if humans have not been there before, their influence has been carried by wind, water, and soil, birds, insects, and animals who bear within their beings the poisoning effects of human rapine of the globe. Nature, in this sense, can be seen as "fallen," not that it is evil itself but in that it has been marred and distorted by human misdevelopment.<sup>11</sup>

In the same vein, Johnson refers us to the work of Elizabeth Dodson Gray. Gray claims in her book *Green Paradise Lost* that humans are no more important than any other species. Speciesism is seen as one type of hierarchical thinking. In turn, hierarchical thinking is seen as characteristically male and as the source of many social ills. Gray says that a first step in correcting such a system would be to assign rights for natural objects. In the chapter "We Must Re-Myth Genesis" she implies that humans do not have any greater intrinsic value than any other aspect of nature whatever.<sup>12</sup>

McFague, too, holds views which are in line with this thinking. I will quote her at some length.

The feminist theologians who have given attention to the nonhuman world have been, for the most part, those involved in Goddess traditions and witchcraft, for whom the body, the earth, and nature's cycles are of critical importance. Those of us within the Christian tradition have much to learn from these sources, but even these feminists have not, I believe, focused primarily on the intrinsic value of the nonhuman in a way sufficient to bring about the needed change of consciousness. ...The principal insight of liberation theologies—that redemption is not the rescue of certain individuals for eternal life in another world but the fulfillment of all humanity in the political and social realities of this world—must be further deprivatized to include the well-being of all life. ...An ecological perspective recognizing human dependence on its environment...is the dominant paradigm of our time and theology that is not done in conversation with this paradigm is not theology *for our time*.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, it is a truism that human life is dependent upon its environment, but McFague and the other authors cited are talking about something distinct from this. They claim that we have an ethical obligation to care for the environment for its own sake. McFague explicitly wants to replace the I-it relationship with an I-Thou relationship.<sup>14</sup>

To make sense of such talk we must inspire nature. Otherwise, nature would have to be seen as totally indifferent to change of any kind, and the notions of harming or destroying nature would make no sense. To an indifferent nature, volcanic eruptions, ice ages, and the collisions of continents are not destruction; they are business as usual. Terms like 'destruction' and 'harm' are relative to values and interests. Historically, cultivated land, land changed to better serve human needs, was regarded for that reason as improved land.<sup>15</sup> Damaging the Earth meant altering it so that it was less useful to people. Inspiring the Earth, on the other hand, gives the Earth interests. Making the Earth a part of God makes us accountable to the Earth for God's own sake. In the latter case, harm to the Earth is no longer understood relative to human interests but relative to God's interests. Presumably, God, immanent in the world, has as interests the stability, equilibrium, and species diversity of the eco-system,<sup>16</sup> but different prophets might give us different agendas.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is not the Earth. The Earth is cursed (Gen. 3.17). Christian ethics does not encourage us to act naturally. Acting naturally is what separates us from God. Christianity demands that we act supra-naturally. God transcends the Earth, and we seek communion with God, not the Earth. Denying the reality of this bifurcation effectively denies original sin and vitiates any need for a Christ. The immanence of God in the world would seem to be inconsistent with the Gospel message, and claims of God's immanence would thus be no proper motivation for anything, including referring to God as female.

What is more important here, is that there is no essential or practical connection between monotheism and environmental disruption. The essential

transcendence of God is not a reason to lay waste to the planet. God said to subdue the Earth, not to make it uninhabitable. A conservationist attitude follows from an awareness that we have an obligation not to put people arbitrarily at risk and that the ecosystem cannot continue to support people if it is stressed without limit. There is no need to resort to pantheism for adequate motivation to protect the environment.

Johnson's argument presupposes that maleness, patriarchy and dualism are linked in some essential or causal way, not only to each other but to a number of other disdained qualities and practices. This view is shared by the authors Johnson cites for support. Gray is the most advanced of these authors. Male hierarchical thinking is seen by Gray as the common denominator of sexism, classism, racism, speciesism, dualism, scientific reductionism, patriarchy, and inequality in general.

Ruether, in turn, simply *defines* 'patriarchy' as hierarchy, explicitly including in the notion of 'patriarchy' master-slave relationships and "racial overlords over colonized people."<sup>17</sup> Modes of reasoning are seen as gender typed, as when she claims that the elimination of gender bias will require a "new form of human intelligence," since the present one is "white Western male" rationality.<sup>18</sup>

One problem with this conceptual approach is that, while decrying dualism and reductionism of one sort, it is in its own way reductionist and rigidly dualistic. We are offered a virtually undifferentiated complex—male/logical/hierarchical/rational/linear/human-centered/oppressive/exploitive/capitalistic/patriarchal/individualistic/imperialistic/dualistic. This complex is reductionist in the sense that all these qualities reduce to maleness. It is rounded out by occasional references to whiteness, Westernness, and heterosexuality. It is balanced by a corresponding complex of allegedly female qualities so that we end up with a dualism whose complements are male/female, hierarchical/communal, capitalist/socialist, exploitive/non-exploitive, etc. All of the "male" traits are valued negatively, the "female" traits positively. Paradoxically, the complements include dualistic/holistic and reductionist/non-reductionist, with dualism and reductionism supposedly being traits characteristic of male thinking. The evident logical deficiencies of this kind of conflation, and the one-sided valuations of its metaphysic, require no further comment.

Suppose, though, that the gender-dualist picture of reality is correct. Then God Himself would surely be aware of this dichotomy, and we would have to begin asking in earnest why God revealed Himself exclusively in male terms, why Jesus deliberately called God 'Father' and not 'Mother.' If the authors quoted above are correct in the gender-dualistic view of society implicit in their arguments, then Christian women become radically estranged from God in a way no conservative theologian has ever dared allege. On the other hand, if we deny such gender dualism we leave open the possibility that

male references to God in the Bible signify nothing essentially non-female about God.

I conclude that Johnson's argument is unconvincing. Johnson's advocacy of the use of female terms for God rests on a demeaning, false stereotype of maleness, a stereotype which does not deserve our support. Her argument also appeals to an alleged ecological imperative to radically revalue the Christian faith. The support for this imperative is lacking in that ecological destruction is not entailed by transcendental views of God, and the pantheism involved in the proposed revaluation is objectionable. As well, Johnson's argument rests upon a conflation of several concepts, including 'patriarchy' and 'spirit-matter dualism,' that have no obvious connection. A realistic view of maleness, together with a more careful, non-reductionist use of terms, would shatter the gender-dualist paradigm presupposed in Johnson's argument.

Although Johnson fails to provide support for a societal imperative to refer to God using female terms, there might be other causal links between the use of female terms for God and improved social conditions. However, consider the Kogi of the Colombian Sierra Nevada. They refer to the Creator of the Universe exclusively in females terms, yet their society is a rigid patriarchy, the all-male priesthood dictating even the most minute aspects of Kogi life.<sup>19</sup> Consider also the social structures of ancient Egypt and other societies with strong goddess traditions. Historically, there seems to be no correlation whatever between the gender of a supreme Deity and social conditions. The case for a causal connection between the perceived gender of God and social conditions is tenuous at best. Therefore, it is not at all clear that a referentially hermaphroditic supreme Deity (God/ess), or an alternately male and female supreme Deity, would be causally efficacious on social conditions.<sup>20</sup>

Does there remain an adequate reason for breaking with tradition and Biblical example, and for referring to God as female? Johnson implies in her paper that the exclusive use of male terms for God alienates women from the Church, making them "invisible." This is a serious matter. The Gospel is for everyone, and we should not engage in practices that suggest otherwise. But experience indicates that the alleged alienation is more a matter of interpretation than a matter of reality. For example, in the United States, the fastest growing churches are mostly conservative, and most of their new membership is women. Women hold fewer positions of authority in the more conservative churches, but women are aware of that when they join, and they are joining conservative churches anyway and in numbers that significantly exceed men.<sup>21</sup> This suggests that Johnson's allegation is a victory of theory over observation. Christianity is already inclusive. We are not all Semitic, or Jewish, or male, but all who accept Christ are children of Abraham, are God's chosen people—and sons, in the sense of full inheritors in the Kingdom of God.

It may be that certain individuals, for whatever reasons, feel alienated from God when they refer to God exclusively in male terms. If this is the case, and if referring to God in female terms facilitates their growth as Christians, then that would be a reason in favor of their so referring to God. This does not imply that those who refer to God in exclusively male terms are wrong to do so. Rather, it is a principle that admits of personal differences in how people best relate to their Creator. It states that individuals and individual churches should do what best facilitates their growth in the Faith, and that possibly no one practice will be best for all people.

I have spoken with some people who seem to take the liberalism of the above paragraph as an affront to equality. The objection seems to be ideological, requiring that references to God should include female terms not because doing so is instrumentally good (Johnson's approach) but because using a single gender is intrinsically wrong. Even assuming that such a principle holds at all, additional premises would be required to establish it as an *overriding* principle. In any case, it does not seem tenable for anyone subscribing to the perfection of Christ. While we do not have a record of Jesus specifically denouncing every form of evil, he surely never took part in wrongdoing, and Jesus referred to God exclusively in male terms. It would seem, then, that there is nothing intrinsically wrong in doing so.

As for God the Father, He is, as always, flowing with just those positive qualities that Johnson wants to say are gynocentric and in opposition to maleness. God, Abba, is loving, supportive, gracious, charitable, forgiving and encouraging, and He is patiently training us to be likewise.<sup>22</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Patricia Altenbernd Johnson, "Feminist Christian Philosophy?" *Faith and Philosophy*, 9 (1992), 320-34.
2. Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).
3. Johnson, p. 330.
4. Johnson, pp. 330-31.
5. Johnson, p. 331.
6. While discussing Ruddick, I will follow her practice of capitalizing 'father' and 'fatherhood' while leaving 'mother' and 'motherhood' in lower case. See Ruddick, p. 42.
7. Ruddick, p. 42.
8. Johnson, p. 328. See Sallie McFague, "God as Mother," in *Weaving the Visions*, eds. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989).
9. Johnson, p. 327.



10. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 89.

11. Ruether, p. 91.

12. Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Green Paradise Lost* (Wellesley, MA: Roundtable Press, 1981).

13. Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 7.

14. McFague, p. 11.

15. See, for example, John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Ch. 5, § 37.

16. See William Aiken, "Ethical Issues in Agriculture," in *Earthbound: New Introductory Essays in Environmental Ethics*, ed. Tom Regan (New York: Random House, 1984), p. 268, where 'ecocentrism' roughly corresponds to my use of 'eco-holism.'

17. Ruether, p. 61.

18. Ruether, p. 89.

19. See G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *The Sacred Mountain of Colombia's Kogi Indians* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990). The Kogi also reject Cartesian-style spirit-matter dualism, and live according to an extremely eco-holistic ethic, practices Johnson claims are conducive to the demise of patriarchy.

20. It has been suggested that a goddess may be of a sort that serves only to reflect and reinforce existing gender roles. (See Jane Mary Trau, "Exclusively Male Imagery in Religious Language," *Worship* 66, No. 4 (1992), 314-15.) It is not clear that goddesses can actually be efficacious in this way, but if so, and if Johnson's contention is correct that male and female terms for God would have different connotations corresponding to contemporary gender roles (whatever those roles actually are), then no societal changes would be effected by referring to God as female. Rather, present social attitudes would only be reinforced.

21. Tony Walter, "Why Are Most Churchgoers Women?," *Vox Evangelica* 20 (1990), 73-80.

22. An earlier version of this paper was read at Berry College at the 1993 Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian philosophers. I thank those taking part in the discussion for their helpful comments.