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WHY NOT GOD THE MOTHER?

Andrew J. Dell'Olio

This essay considers recent criticism of the use of inclusive language within Christian discourse, particularly the reference to God as "Mother." The author argues that these criticisms fail to establish that the supplemental usage of "God the Mother," in addition to the traditional usage of "God the Father," is inappropriate for Christian God-talk. Some positive reasons for referring to God as "Mother" are also offered, not the least of which is its helpfulness in overcoming overly restrictive conceptions of God.

In light of the increasing acceptance among Christians of more inclusive, less androcentric language about God, concerns have been raised about the propriety of speaking about God in female terms. The critics of the growing inclusive language movement are particularly troubled by the practice of referring to God as "Mother" in addition to — or in some cases, instead of — the traditional appellation, "God the Father." For some of these critics, the usage of such language risks the very identity and integrity of the Christian faith. For example, in a recent collection of essays critical of the inclusive language movement, Leslie Zeigler decries those Christian feminists who have ignored the fact that "a number of scholars have published clear and convincing arguments that the use of female language for God results in a denial of the gospel."[1]

Upon examining these arguments, however, I believe they will be found to be markedly less than clear and convincing. In what follows I will focus on the work of Elizabeth Achtemeier and others who argue that Christians ought not call God "Mother."[2] I will suggest that these arguments are not persuasive. I will not, however, endeavor to defend those feminist theologians who aim to eliminate all masculine language about God including the reference to God as "Father". There are many good reasons for retaining such language in Christian practice, not the least of which is the fact that masculine language about God is used in the Bible and that Jesus does explicitly refer to God as "Father." Instead I will suggest that the supplementary use of feminine language for God, including the term "Mother-God," not only withstands the criticisms leveled against it but also commends itself for positive reasons, in particular, its helpfulness in overcoming overly restrictive conceptions of God.[3]

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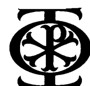

I. The Appeal to Biblical Explicitness

One purported reason for the view that Christians should not call God "Mother" is that the Bible does not do so. According to Elizabeth Achtemeier, "the Bible uses masculine language for God because that is the language with which God has revealed himself."[4] Since Christianity is a revealed religion, it "claims no knowledge of God beyond the knowledge God has given of himself through his words and deeds in the histories of Israel and of Jesus Christ and his church."[5] Thus, for Achtemeier, since the Biblical revelation contains predominantly masculine language about God and since "God is the one whom Jesus reveals as his Father,"[6] we must conclude that God cannot properly be referred to as "Mother."[7]

Implicit in this view is what we might call the appeal to Biblical explicitness. This is the claim that only those terms that are explicitly used in the Bible may count as legitimate metaphors for God. Since "Mother" is not used explicitly in the Bible to refer to God, the use of the term "Mother" for God should be excluded from Christian discourse.

It seems to me that there are a number of problems with this line of thinking. First, it is not true that Christianity is a religion which claims that nothing can be known about God outside of the Biblical revelation. There is a long tradition in Christianity of believing that God can be known, at least in some sense, through the world God has created. This view, held in common by such eminent Christian theologians as Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, has biblical precedents. Consider Psalm 19 which informs us that "The Heavens declare the glory of God," or Paul's own declaration that "The invisible things of God are understood by the things God has made" (Romans 1.20). Thus, Aquinas, for example, in his well-known doctrine of analogy, taught that we can know something about God by analogy to the things God has made, in the way we can know something about an unseen cause from its perceived effects.[8] All sorts of terms that might not be explicitly mentioned in the Bible but are nonetheless consistent with, if not implied by what is said, may then be usefully employed within Christian discourse about God. We need just think of such fruitful descriptions for God within Christian theology as "most perfect being" or "uncaused first cause," or, for that matter, the term "person." While these terms are not themselves part of the Biblical revelation, they nonetheless further our understanding of what is explicitly stated therein.

The claim that language about God ought to be restricted to what is explicitly stated in the Bible, therefore, is out of step with both the Christian theological tradition and the Bible itself. It is not a good reason for excluding "Mother" from Christian discourse about God, especially if there is good reason, as there is, to think that such positive qualities of earthly mothers as unconditional love and selfless nurturance may fruitfully serve as analogies to the loving and nurturing qualities of the God revealed in Jesus Christ.[9] For such an analogy is perfectly consistent with what Christians know of God as revealed in scripture.

Indeed, the Biblical revelation itself suggests as much. For, contrary

to the claims of some critics of the use of feminine language about God — William Harper, for example — God does not reveal Godself in the Bible in exclusively masculine language.[10] There are numerous Biblical examples of the use of feminine language to describe God, from the midwife imagery of Psalms 22.9 and the childbirthing imagery of Isaiah 42.14, to the image of the woman searching for her lost coins in Luke 15.3-10. The claim that "God revealed Himself exclusively in male terms"[11] is simply false. The feminine language that does explicitly occur in the Bible may then serve as a basis for the use of certain feminine terms (like "mother") in connection with God since such terms are consistent with the feminine language that is explicitly used.

II. Metaphors and Similes

In contrast to Harper, Achtemeier does acknowledge that there are some feminine images of God in the Bible, although she claims that such language does not carry the same weight as the masculine images. This is because, following Roland Frye,[12] she notes that the figures of speech employed in these cases are similes rather than metaphors and that this makes all the difference. While both simile and metaphor are used to compare one thing to another, a simile's comparison is self-limiting. As Achtemeier puts it, "A simile compares one aspect of something to another....In metaphors, on the other hand, identity between the subject and the thing compared to it is assumed."[13] In other words, while a simile says one thing is *like* another in certain respects, that is, in virtue of a likeness in some aspect or quality, a metaphor says one thing in its entirety simply *is* another thing. A metaphor thereby expresses a fuller, more complete comparison. Thus, in the Biblical statement "I will cry out like a woman in labor" (Isaiah 42.14), Achtemeier and Frye claim that God is here compared to a woman only in certain aspects, but not wholly, that is, God is not identified with a woman. Feminine language about God in the Bible never compares the whole of God with a woman or a mother as is the case with the Biblical metaphors of God as Father, King, Judge, etc. For Achtemeier and Frye, this would be a good reason to desist from using the predicating metaphor "God the Mother."

This claim requires some careful examination. In the first place, it is not at all clear that the distinction between metaphor and simile can bear the weight Achtemeier and Frye place upon it. Both are still equally figurative uses of language and the identities made in predicating metaphors are still only comparisons, not strict equivalencies. Take the following fairly standard definition of metaphor: "A metaphor is commonly defined as an implied comparison between two things unlike in most respects but alike in the respect in which they are compared."[14] Note how metaphor is here defined in terms that are almost identical to the way in which Achtemeier and Frye define simile, that is, as a comparison between two different things in certain respects, not as an identity equivalence. In this regard, Sallie McFague's point that metaphors always express what something "is not" as much as they express what something "is" serves as a useful corrective to those who would too pos-

itively identify a metaphor with that to which it figuratively stands in comparison.[15] For all analogical predication of the divine involves a comparison of finite to infinite, a comparison that always leaves unsaid much more than is said. A metaphor for God is then as much unlike God as it is like God, indeed, it is more unlike than like God, for the finite can never truly compare to the infinite.

Secondly, it is worth noting that not all linguistic theorists draw such sharp differences between metaphors and similes. Terence Hawkes explains that metaphors and similes are both figures of speech that "transfer" or "carry over" (*meta-phora*) meaning from one thing to another, with the difference that simile performs this meaning transference by the use of such terms as "like" or "as if."[16] For this reason the comparison made by a simile is more focused and pre-determined. Yet Hawkes goes on to say that, rather than think of simile as metaphor's poor relation, "the `controlled' effects of simile can be as great or greater than the wider but often vaguer implications of metaphor."[17] He adds, "In any case, abstract value-judgements are pointless."[18] And Janet Martin Soskice has also argued against the superiority of metaphor over simile, maintaining that, while they may differ in grammatical form, they are nonetheless functionally equivalent.[19] If Hawkes and Soskice are correct, then there is no basis for the claim of Achtemeier and Frye that metaphor is superior to simile by virtue of the strength of its comparisons. Therefore, contrary to Achtemeier and Frye, metaphors ought not to be regarded as a linguistically privileged form of figurative language.

Some linguistic theorists have even urged the abandonment of the distinction between metaphor and simile. Owen Barfield, for example, regards a metaphor as simply "a simile with the word `like' missed out."[20] Philip Wheelwright also suggests that "the grammarian's familiar distinction between metaphor and simile is to be largely ignored."[21] And, in a more philosophical vein, Robert Fogelin has argued persuasively in defense of the traditional Aristotelian position that metaphors are simply elliptical similes.[22] Given the lack of consensus by philosophers and linguistic theorists as to the difference between metaphor and simile, much less the superiority of the former to the latter, it would seen that the distinction between metaphor and simile is a weak basis upon which to build the position that Christians ought not speak of God as "Mother."

Yet, even if we grant that the distinction between simile and metaphor is significant, one need not grant the inference Achtemeier and Frye draw from it. That is, even if similes only compare aspects of things rather than wholes, this does not bar the corresponding use of a full-blown predicative metaphor that builds on the aspects compared in the simile. For, after all, it is a commonplace within philosophy to regard aspects or qualities as inhering in some thing or substance rather than as "free-floating" entities. All but the most die-hard Platonists would agree that "wetness" does not appear apart from wet things. And even if there is some debate about the ontological status of universal predicables, our language clearly functions in such a way that qualities are predicated of some subject. A predicate does not stand alone but

is always predicated *of* a thing. So where there are predicates (aspects, qualities, properties, etc.), it is implied that there are things which bear these predicates.

It is also a philosophical commonplace to regard some of these predicates (qualities or properties) as determining the nature of that thing in an essential way. For example, Aristotle defined the human being as the "rational animal" because he took rational thought to be an essential property of human beings. Rationality is predicated of human beings in such a unique way that, in addition to animality, it is picked out as the defining quality of human nature. Human beings may then be thought of as those animals in whom one may typically, if not exclusively, find such properties as cogitation, reflection, deliberation, etc. It follows, therefore, that if one comes across the use of the predicates "cogitates," "reflects," "deliberates," etc. in discourse about an animal, then one is reasonable in assuming that animal is a human being.[23] As the old saying goes, "if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it's a duck." So, for example, if in some discourse one finds duck-predicates used to describe a thing, one would be perfectly within one's linguistic rights to refer to that thing in subsequent discourse as a duck.

Now if one finds maternal predicates ascribed to a subject, as is the case in certain Biblical descriptions of God, it would seem that one is within one's linguistic rights to refer to God as "Mother." After all, mothers are those beings who paradigmatically possess maternal properties described by maternal predicates. Of course, not all things that possess maternal properties need be mothers. Certainly something besides a mother — a father, perhaps — can possess maternal and other feminine traits. Yet there are some maternal traits or properties that no being but a mother could possess. These would be those essential properties that uniquely pick out mothers from all other beings, for example, the ability to give birth and suckle the young. So if God is described in the Bible in terms of birthing imagery — for example, in Moses' warning to the Israelites that "You forget the God who gave you birth" (Deuteronomy 32:18) — then one could, with good reason, speak of God as "Mother" in addition to "Father". Some qualities the Bible reveals about God are just not captured by the Father metaphor alone. Fathers, after all, do not give birth.[24]

The feminine, and especially maternal, similes which occur in the Bible give the Christian not only reasonable warrant to go beyond the exclusive use of the Father metaphor when speaking about God, but an imperative to do so. At the very least, to speak of God as "Mother" does not appear to be a use of language that is contrary to the way God is revealed in the Bible. One would need some other reason to believe that such language is somehow illegitimate.

III. Appeal to Words of Jesus

Some might respond that Christians have a definitive authority in the matter of how to speak about God, namely, God incarnate, Jesus Christ. Since Jesus explicitly refers to God as Father and never as Mother,

Christians could do no better than to follow in his example. Indeed, Christians are obligated to do so. As Achtemeier puts it, "God is not just any god, capable of being named according to human fancy. No, God is the one whom Jesus reveals as his Father."[25] But all that this version of the appeal to explicitness establishes is that there are good reasons, in the positive example of the explicit words of Jesus, for Christians to call God "Father." It does not establish that there are good reasons *not* to call God "Mother."[26] That is, even if Jesus's explicit use of a term may serve as justification for its use by Christians, it does not follow that the absence of the explicit use of a term renders the use of that term by Christians illicit.

Besides, I know of no theological principle, Biblical or otherwise, that demands that only those words explicitly used by Jesus in referring to God may be used by Christians for the same purpose. If that were the case, not only would a host of theological terms be shorn from the Christian lexicon, but so would every Biblical term used to describe God not explicitly mentioned by Jesus. Rather than protect Christian discourse from erosion, such a misguided principle risks its decimation.

Furthermore, there is a basis in Jesus's own words for making room in Christian discourse for God the Mother. Recall the Gospel of Luke where Jesus refers to himself as a mother hen desiring to gather her chicks under her wings (Luke 13.34).[27] If, as Christians believe, Jesus is God incarnate, and if Jesus refers to himself as possessing maternal desires, then Christians have good reason to speak of God as having maternal desires for her children. And since Jesus's own words legitimize language about God's maternal qualities, and since maternal qualities typically inhere in mothers, Christians have good reason to speak about God as Mother.[28] It is a use of language that is perfectly consistent with the Biblical revelation, including the words of Jesus.

Perhaps the most sophisticated version of the appeal to the words of Jesus has recently been articulated by Donald D. Hook and Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. In their "theolinguistic" analysis of this issue, they argue that Jesus uses the term "Father" as "a vocative and designating term" or "designating title" for God which "functions like a proper name in its unique referentiality."[29] As a consequence, the divine title "Father," "possesses privileged and foundational status within Christian discourse,"[30] and is not easily replaced by the term "Mother."

First, the view that "Father" is a rigid designator, functioning like a proper name, is a peculiar one for Hook and Kimmel to hold. For if the term "Father" really functions like a proper name, then it is devoid of all metaphorical significance. The term "Father" would be merely a tag attached to God and then handed down through the ages, much like the name "Cicero" or "Tully" — proper names which have no metaphorical significance whatsoever. But surely the term "Father" has some metaphorical significance with regard to God. Therefore, the term cannot simply be treated as a proper name.[31]

But let us assume that Hook and Kimel are correct that the term "Father" is to be regarded as a designative title which has functioned in Christian discourse as a proper name with privileged status. Still, it

does not follow from this that the term "Mother" can not come to be regarded in this way. That is, while Hook and Kimel's analysis may provide a good reason why the term "Father" *ought not* to be abandoned by Christians, it does not provide a good reason why the term "Mother" *ought* to be eschewed.

Yet, we find this sort of problematic reasoning in Hook and Kimel's three explicit objections to substituting "Mother" for "Father" or alternating "Mother" with "Father," particularly in the first objection.[32] This objection involves a direct appeal to the explicit words of Jesus who, in addressing God as "Father," initiates a causal network, or borrowing the terminology of Michael Devitt, a "designating chain" of reference.[33] The term "Father" is thus said to be "a uniquely referring title related to divinity by the designating chain of dominical and apostolic practice."[34] Hook and Kimel go on to assert that, "If we wish to invoke God or refer to him successfully, we rightly return to the ecclesial d-chain. It is the historical community of the Church that equips us to name God truly."[35]

Once again, assuming that Hook and Kimel are correct about the powers of the historical community of the Church to name God truly, all we have is a reason for referring to God as "Father." We do not have a reason for eschewing the term "Mother" as supplement for "Father." Hook and Kimel, however, believe that the absence of a designating chain for the term "Mother" originating in the explicit words of Jesus does constitute a reason for not using that term in Christian discourse in the way we use the term "Father." But this commits them to the view that Christians are only justified in addressing or referring to God when they use names of God which have been rigidly designated of God by Jesus. And this seems to be nothing more than a variant of the appeal to the explicit words of Jesus which we have already found to be groundless.

Hook and Kimel's suggestion that "Father" functions like a proper name or rigid designator does not help their case. While it is true that Christians rightly refer to God through the use of the name "Father", a name originating in an "initial baptism" or designating speech act of Jesus, this is not a reason to deny that "Mother" can also serve as a name which rigidly designates God. A rigid designator is not an exclusive designator. "Tully" is as much a rigid designator for Cicero as is "Cicero" since both names refer to the same person, that is, both names equally "fix the referent."[36] Hook and Kimel admit as much when they note that it is always possible to give a new name or nickname to an individual,[37] presumably by a similar act of rigid designation.

Hook and Kimel, however, claim that the use of such a new name for God would be unjustified unless its "initial baptism" occurred in a new revelation "that would ground the new naming and from which would flow subsequent designation."[38] But Hook and Kimel give no additional justification why this new naming must have as its ground a new revelation. This seems to be another variant of the appeal to Biblical explicitness, an appeal we have already determined to have reason to reject. For if Christians can rightly refer to God by general terms that do not explicitly appear in biblical revelation, there is no reason to require that the rigid designation of proper names of God can occur only in a revela-

tion. There need only be some reference-fixing path from the names to God, regardless of how that reference originally got fixed. For example, the original reference-fixing act, the "initial baptism" of the name, may have occurred by ostension in a direct religious experience of God. Presumably this was the case for Julian of Norwich whose mystical experience of God was the basis for her naming God "Mother."[39]

The occurrence of an "initial baptism" of God as "Mother," whether by Julian of Norwich or the prior Christian community,[40] and the existence of an ecclesial designating chain of reference or path from present speakers, via Mary Baker Eddy to medieval Cistercians and Beguines to this naming of God, are all that Christians need to use "Mother" as a proper name or rigid designator of God. The fact that God is not explicitly named or designated "Mother" in the Biblical revelation, therefore, does not rule out the legitimate naming or designating of God as "Mother" by subsequent speakers in the Christian tradition.

Hook and Kimel's second and third objections to the use of the term "Mother" for God are both based on the grammatical gender of the terms. In the second objection, Hook and Kimel make the following claim:

> ..."Mother" and "Father" are mutually exclusive terms. They are overtly marked for feminine and masculine gender, respectively, and therefore should not be used in modern English to name the same object. To do so is to disrupt gender concord and confuse the hearer.[41]

And in the third objection, they make a similar claim, this time based on the gender of God in the grammar of the Biblical narrative:

> ...the feminine gender of "Mother" disagrees both with the grammatical gender of the biblical deity and with the gender of the English word `God.'...Within the narrative presentation of the Holy Scriptures, divinity is assigned masculine grammatical gender (as opposed to sex), which governs the choice of names, titles, and pronouns for God....This narrative telling is constitutive for the worship and discourse of the Church and our theological identification of God.[42]

It seems to me that in both of these objections Hook and Kimel place inordinate importance on the limitations of grammar to decide what may or may not be said of the unlimited divine being Christians worship. If both "Father" and "Mother" are metaphors and, as Hook and Kimel admit, do not in a literal sense signify the sexuality of the God they describe, it is unclear why they still insist that "if `Father' properly designates the deity, then `Mother' cannot logically do so — and vice versa."[43] Certainly Christians know that God has no real gender, so why think that the use of a name which bears one grammatical gender logically rules out the use of a name which bears another? In languages whose nominatives are gendered, regardless of the actual gender of the

referent, it is not unusual to find two synonyms of different grammatical gender. For example, the ordinary German word for "corpse" is *"Leiche,"* which is grammatically feminine, while its more dignified synonym, *"Leichnam,"* is grammatically masculine. The very same body, regardless of its real gender, may be referred to by either a grammatically feminine or a grammatically masculine term. One would think that in the case of God, a being Christians know to have no actual gender, the use of two nominatives of differing grammatical gender would be even less problematic.

And why should Hook and Kimel think that the exclusive use of one grammatical gender prevents the "confusion" inclusive language would supposedly otherwise cause? One should rather think that the deliberately exclusive use of one grammatical gender for a being who is literally genderless is more likely to cause confusion in the hearers of this sort of discourse. For Christians who are constantly exposed to this kind of discourse are much more likely to confuse grammatical gender with real gender, mistakenly imagining or conceptualizing God as "male" rather than sexually transcendent. The exclusive use of the term "Father" and other exclusively masculine titles for God hinders rather than aids clear thinking about God.

Hook and Kimel seem to have caused even themselves some confusion on this matter. After having acknowledged that God is "sexually transcendent" with no real gender, they nevertheless go on to write:

> The notional gender of modern English requires that the gender of vocative titles agree with the gender of their referent. We may speak figuratively of God as an eagle nurturing her young or as a mother-bear protecting her cubs; but we will *name* him `Father', not `Mother'.[44]

The point here is that the grammatical gender of the vocative title "Father" determines that the referent of that title, God, share its gender. In other words, Hook and Kimel seem to be suggesting that the limitations of our grammar also limit and fix the real gender of God. What else could it mean for God, as referent of the title "Father", to share agreement with the gender of this title, than for God to be literally masculine? Hook and Kimel seem to have invested grammatical gender with the magical power to determine that a genderless God possesses exclusively masculine gender. For the only reason that Hook and Kimel have for denying that we can name God "Mother" appears to be that, because of the rigid designation of the name "Father," God's real gender is masculine.

The problem here is that Hook and Kimel seem to be using a rigid designator to infer something of the real nature of the referent of that designator. That is, they are allowing a rigid designator to function as a kind of description of its referent, so that to designate God as "Father" is tantamount to describing God as "our masculine parent." In doing so, Hook and Kimel subvert the very point of Kripke's theory of rigid designation — that names are not descriptions. And in this they are seriously confused.

It would have been better had Hook and Kimel suggested that because God has no real gender, we ought not limit our naming of God to one grammatically masculine name. This is consistent with the Christian tradition in its early formative and medieval periods which produced a number of discourses on the divine names, the most famous and most influential being that of Pseudo-Dionysius. The main theme of these discourses is the realization that because God's transcendent being is limitless, we, as limited beings, are unable to know the divine essence as it is. "From this we see the necessity of giving to God many names," writes Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, for we name God by analogy to what we can know, that is, from "the perfections belonging to things" which are found to be diverse. Therefore, the names by which we signify God's limited perfection must also be diverse. As Aquinas goes on to explain:

> Were we able to understand the divine essence itself as it is and give to it the name that belongs to it, we would express it by only one name. This is promised to those who will see God through God's essence: "In that day there shall be one Lord, and his name shall be one" (Zach. 14.9).[45]

Until the time that has been promised us comes to pass, it is best that we call God by many names lest we presume that we have already arrived at the knowledge of God as God truly is. For the purposes of our discussion, then, it is best that we not exclude the use of the name "Mother" in addition to "Father" in Christian discourse lest we mistakenly delimit the unlimited essence of God and forget the ineffable divine name that is "above all other names" (Philippians 2.9).

IV. The Risk of Pantheism

The most straightforwardly theological reason for avoiding calling God "Mother" is that doing so risks a slippery slope into the age-old heresy of pantheism, that is, it leads to the identification of God with the world. For, the critics maintain, to conceive of God as Mother, is to conceive of the world being "born" of the very body of God. In this way it identifies God and the world and fails to distinguish the creator from the creation. According to Achetemeier, the Bible's language for God is masculine in order to set God apart from nature and thereby distinguish the Biblical God from the pre-Biblical deities who are not differentiated from the world. For Achtemeier, "It is precisely the introduction of female language for God that opens the door to such identification of God with the world...."[46] She claims, furthermore, "If God is identified with his creation, we finally make ourselves gods and goddesses — the ultimate and primeval sin, according to Genesis 3 and the rest of the Scriptures." [47]

To speak of God as "Father," however, reinforces the distinction between creator and creation for this language suggests God's transcendence and otherness from the world. "God, the biblical writers are say-

ing, is in no way contained in or bound up with or dependent on or revealed through his creation."[48] That is why the Bible does not speak of the world as a part of the being of God but "as an object of the divine speech."[49] "God creates the world outside of himself, by the instrument of his Word."[50] So, God does not "give birth" to the world as mother would, but rather "speaks" the world into existence as only a Father-God could.

I find these claims to be odd for a number of reasons. First of all, why think that only a God called Father could speak the world into being? Can mothers not speak? Well, yes, the reply might go, but they would not "speak" the world into being; they would "birth" it into being in a way, say, analogous to how human mothers give birth.[51] But analogy to creaturely parents surely cannot serve as the guide here for human fathers do not "speak" their children into being. In fact, as any seventh grade student of biology will tell you, human children spring from the loins of their fathers as much as they do the body of their mothers.

Based on the analogy of human parenting, there is no reason to believe that speaking of God as "Mother" any more leads to a pantheistic identification of God and the world than does speaking of God as "Father." If by "pantheism" one means the view that God is identical to the world, as in Spinoza's view that God and the world are one substance, then the relationship between mothers and their children is hardly a parallel case. A mother and her child are two distinct entities. Mothers are no more identical to their children than are fathers. And, for that matter, fathers are no more unlike their children, no more "wholly other" in any radical ontological sense which preserves transcendence than are mothers. In fact, not only is there no good reason to think that referring exclusively to God as "Father" preserves God's transcendence any more than referring to God as "Mother," but there is good reason to steer clear of this kind of reasoning. For the insistence that the use of father-language preserves the otherness of God in a way that mother-language cannot simply serves to perpetuate the image of the absent or aloof father, an image contemporary fathers have made efforts at trying to overcome.

Finally, it is unclear to what extent language that connotes an intimacy between God and the world is theologically problematic. The Christian God is both immanent to the world as well as transcendent from the world. If calling God "Mother" serves to remind us of the closeness and intimacy we as God's children share with God then it fulfills a very useful theological and pastoral function. For far from leading to our identification with God or the claim that we ourselves are somehow gods, the sense of our intimacy with God ought to reinforce our ultimate dependence on God for our very being. For the Bible reminds us that, like the helpless fetus in her mother's womb, "in God we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17.28). There is no clearer biblical statement than this of the extent to which we, as creatures, *are* by virtue of our *being in God*. There is no better analogical relationship to this radical dependency of one being upon the being of another than the dependency of the fetus on his mother, without whom he is simply not viable.

That is why Paul Tillich can say that the symbolic dimension of God as the "ground of being," "points to the mother-quality of giving birth, carrying, and embracing, and, at the same time, of calling back, resisting independence of the created, and swallowing it."[52] Far from encouraging an inflated sense of ourselves as gods, the image of God as Mother, when properly understood, leads to a profound sense of our creaturely dependence on God the creator.[53]

V. Theology and Human Interests

One of the primary motivations behind the recent critiques of the inclusive language movement is the concern that theology is being made to serve other, more ideological or political interests.[54] This is certainly a legitimate concern. Christians ought not remake God into the image of their pet ideology simply in order to serve their social or political interests. That is precisely why Christian philosophers and theologians should be hesitant to promote the use of exclusively masculine language to speak about God. For as feminist theologians rightly point out, such language can and has been used to serve a sexist, patriarchal ideology.[55] A healthy dose of the hermeneutics of suspicion teaches us that even well-intentioned Christians may use theology or the Bible to serve some self-serving will to power.[56] "Everything is dangerous" warns Michel Foucault, alluding to how the drive for power and domination infests all that we do, even in areas where we least suspect it.[57] One can rightly wonder, then, to what extent the weak philosophical and theological reasons given for the exclusion of feminine language about God are merely transparent masks which hardly conceal the power interests they, consciously or not, serve. To put this postmodern insight into Christian terminology, no human interpretation of God's revelation, no matter how seemingly benign and well-intentioned, is immune from sinfulness.

It is thus too simplistic to believe, as Achtemeier and other critics of inclusive language do, that the choice in this debate simply comes down to whether or not one regards the Bible as the words of God. Assuming the Christian thinker does acknowledge the Bible to be divine revelation, then, for these critics, the predominant use of masculine language settles the issue against inclusive language. In this view, for feminists to explain the preponderance of masculine images for God in terms of the contingencies of the context of the Biblical revelation, and in particular, the patriarchy of the time and place, is to deny the divine character of the revelation. It is to substitute human interests for "pure" theology.

Yet these sorts of criticisms are mistaken on two counts. First, they assume that one can interpret scripture in a way that is free from all subjectivity, that is, all human finitude and fallibility. But one's own limitations, including one's sinful self-interest, will always render one's understanding of the Biblical revelation less than God's own understanding of it. To admit this much is simply to admit that one is not God, but a limited, fallible human being. This is an admission Christians are obligated to make. Second, such a position erroneously substitutes what sounds more like the Muslim view of scripture as the

unmediated revelation of God for the dominant Christian view. In the main, the Christian tradition has always understood the Biblical revelation as writings inspired by God but written by human beings. In this view, the Bible does not fall from the sky already made, but is received through the mediation of human prophets, their particular languages, and their particular historical and cultural contexts. Therefore, it is not as if the choice were whether one regards the Bible to be either God's word or a record of human beings' evolving consciousness of God: the scriptures are God's word revealed through human being's evolving, and limited, historical consciousness. To think otherwise is to treat language about God, including the language God uses to speak to us, with the same ultimacy as God. And this substitution of what is not God for God is the essence of idolatry, a sin Christian thinkers have an obligation to avoid.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the major reasons why Christians ought to desist from the use of feminine language for God, including the phrase "God the Mother," are not persuasive. On the contrary, not only are there no good reasons for avoiding inclusive language about God, there is good reason for advocating its use. Perhaps the best reason to refer to God as "Mother" in addition to "Father" is that it helps us to avoid confusing God with a limited, gendered image or model of God. Indeed, to exclude feminine language about God from Christian discourse, to insist that God could only be referred to as Father and not Mother, is to promote unwittingly another form of idolatry.[58] For such linguistic exclusion risks substituting one particular, gender-specific name for the gender-less, infinitely mysterious God who is primarily revealed to us as "I am who I am" (Exodus 3.13), the name which defies all names. It risks substituting one finite image of God for the infinite divine reality. And it perpetuates both an androcentric, limited understanding of God's nature and the deleterious effects of such a limited understanding. In short, it is to worship a name, a metaphor — not a graven image, perhaps, but an image nonetheless.

Christians must say "no" to this for it is wrong not only theologically but morally as well. In making it difficult for women to recognize that they, too, are made in the image of God, the gender-specific connotations of the exclusive use of God the Father provides the basis for both the continued treatment of women as morally secondary to men and their marginalization within church and society. The exclusive use of masculine language for God uses theology in the service of a very different set of human interests, a very different ideology than that of the feminists, but an ideology nonetheless. For as Elizabeth Johnson and other feminist theologians have maintained, the way we speak and think about God has real consequences for people's lives. As Johnson ably puts it:

> In sum, exclusive, literal patriarchal speech about God is both oppressive and idolatrous. It functions to justify social structures

> of dominance/subordination and an androcentric world view inimical to the genuine and equal human dignity of women, while it simultaneously restricts the mystery of God.[59]

While it may often be difficult to see how easily our images or concepts of God become our idols, it is even more difficult to see how our conceptual idols may adversely affect both others and ourselves.[60] Yet, as John Calvin rightly observed, "The human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual factory of idols."[61] Christian philosophers and theologians ought to resist allowing the masculine image of God the Father to function as another harmful idol. We ought, then, to be open to the positive and liberating effects of gender inclusive language about God. We ought to allow ourselves to reclaim the image of God the Mother, lest we ignore Moses's exhortation and forget the God who gave us birth (Deuteronomy 32.18).[62]

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NOTES

1. Leslie Zeigler, "Christianity or Feminism?" in *Speaking the Christian God*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel. Jr. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1992), 324-325.
2. Ziegler notes that, of the critical responses to gender inclusive language, "Among the most telling are the works of Elizabeth Achtemeier and Roland M. Frye" (p. 325, fn. 18). Achtemeier's most complete statement of her position appears in "Exchanging God for `No Gods': A Discussion of Female Language for God," in Kimel (ed.), *Speaking the Christian God*, pp. 1-16. Other articles include "Why God is Not Mother," *Christianity Today* (16 August 1993), pp. 16-23; "The Impossible Possibility: Evaluating the Feminist Approach to Bible and Theology," *Interpretation* 42, pp. 45-57; and "Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt It?" in *The Hermeneutical Quest*, ed. Donald. G. Miller (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), pp. 97-114. Achtemeier incorporates the main points of Roland Frye's critique in her "Exchanging God for `No Gods'" essay. Frye's own statement may be found in "Language for God and Feminist Language: Problems and Principles" in Kimel (ed.), *Speaking the Christian God*, pp. 17-43. Other examples of recent articles critical of the use of the term "Mother" to describe or address God include William Harper, "On Calling God `Mother'," *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994), pp. 290-297; and Donald D. Hook and Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., "Calling God `Father' A Theolinguistic Analysis," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995), pp. 207-222.
3. The use of the term "Mother" as a supplement to, but not replacement for, the term "Father" in God-talk has been advocated by Patricia Altenbernd Johnson in "Feminist Christian Philosophy?" *Faith and Philosophy*, 9 (1992), 320-34. This essay may be seen as a defense of Johnson's position.
4. Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for `No Gods'," in Kimel (ed.), *Speaking the Christian God*, p. 5.
5. Ibid., p. 5.
6. Ibid., p. 6.
7. While Achtemeier does not go as far as to say that the Bible uses "exclusively" masculine language, other critics of inclusive language do make such a claim. See for example, Harper, "On Calling God `Mother'," pp. 294 and 296.

8. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 13, aa. 1-10.

9. This is not to say that all mothers possess these qualities or that these are qualities possessed only by mothers. Fathers, too, can be nurturing and unconditionally loving. But, by virtue of the physical intimacy she shares with the child she has carried and supported during pregnancy and shortly thereafter, maternal care and nurturance may still be distinguished from paternal care and nurturance. I also do not mean to suggest that women must fulfill this mothering role because of their biology. While men cannot carry a child, men can still take on the mothering role of caring for a newborn. Still, this type of maternal care, whether undertaken by a woman or a man, seems to be qualitatively different than the kind of care fathers typically provide.

10. cf. Harper, "On Calling God `Mother'", *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (April 1994), pp. 294, 296. For a useful critique of Harper's views, see George F. Isham, "Is God Exclusively a Father?", *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (April 1996), pp. 266-71.

11. Ibid., p. 294.

12. See Frye, "Language for God and Feminist Language" in Kimel (ed.), pp. 36-43.

13. Achtemeier in Kimel (ed.), pp. 4-5.

14. Richard E. Hughes and P. Albert Duhamel, *Principles of Rhetoric* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), quoted in Owen Thomas, *Metaphor and Related Subjects* (NY: Random House, 1969), p. 5.

15. See Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

16. Terence Hawkes, *Metaphor* (The Critical Idiom Series, No. 25, London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 2.

17. Ibid., p. 3.

18. Ibid. p. 3.

19. See Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 58-59.

20. Owen Barfield, "Poetic Diction and Legal Fiction," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. C.S. Lewis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), p. 112.

21. Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 71.

22. See Robert Fogelin, *Figuratively Speaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 25-93.

23. Of course the animal being described could turn out to be an ape or a dolphin. Still, it is not clear that these animals can possess all the aforementioned qualities. In either case we judge whether the animal possesses these properties against the paradigm of the subject that does possess them, namely, human beings.

24. While I have used the New Revised Standard Version for the English translation of this phrase, some English translations substitute "the God who fathered you" for "the God who gave you birth." Yet, according to Jeffrey Tigay, the Hebrew verb in question, *holel* (from the root *h-y-l*), which means "to bear" or "to beget" or "to bring forth", "refers literally to the mother's labor pains" (Jeffrey Tigay, *The Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy*, Philadelphia, 1996, p. 307). In his commentary on this passage, Tigay goes on to state that the verb *holel* "...may have been chosen to suggest the image of a mother" (p. 307). "The God who fathered you" would then be a very misleading translation of this Hebrew phase which clearly describes the maternal act of giving birth.

25. Achtemeier in Kimel (ed.), p. 6.

26. Indeed, this line of thinking comes perilously close to fallacious reasoning. For one can interpret the underlying principle behind the appeal to the

explicit words of Jesus as something like the following argument:

(1) If Jesus uses a certain term to refer to God, then Christians may rightly use that term to refer to God.

(2) But Jesus does not use a certain term to refer to God.

(3) Therefore, Christians may not rightly use that term to refer to God.

This argument is clearly invalid as it commits the fallacy of denying the antecedent.

27. Jesus uses additional feminine imagery shortly after this when he describes God's concern for sinners with the image of a woman seeking desperately for her lost coins (Luke 15:8).

28. For an account of a form of spirituality within medieval Christianity which was rooted in an experience of Jesus as mother, see Carolyn Bynun, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

29. Donald D. Hook and Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., "Calling God `Father' A Theolinguistic Analysis" *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (April 1995), p. 207.

30. Ibid., p. 207.

31. I am indebted to an anonymous referee for this point.

32. It is important to note that in all three of their objections Hook and Kimel focus on the substitution of "Mother" for "Father," ignoring the fact that there is a difference between substituting a term for another and alternating the use of a term with another in a supplemental way. It is unclear, therefore, whether the objections against substitution have any force against the view I am endorsing here, namely, the supplemental use of "Mother" along with "Father" in discourse about God.

33. Hook and Kimel, "Calling God `Father' A Theolinguistic Analysis," pp. 209, 217.

34. Ibid., p.217.

35. Ibid., p. 218.

36. See Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

37. Ibid., p. 210.

38. Ibid., p. 218.

39. See Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. and intro. by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). But even this is not necessary. Jerome I. Gellman has argued that for a name to serve as a rigid designator for God "it is sufficient that there be a path from the speaker to God, and not necessary that the speaker, or anyone else, ever have perceived or ostended God. Rigid reference need not be *direct*. It can also be *deferred*" (Gellman, "Naming and Naming God," *Religious Studies* 29, 1993: 215).

40. See Elaine Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2 (Winter 1976): 293-303.

41. Ibid., p. 218.

42. Ibid., p. 220. Garrett Green gives a similar argument in "The Gender of God and the Theology of Metaphor" in *Speaking the Christian God*, ed. Kimel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 58-64.

43. Ibid., p. 218.

44. Ibid., p. 220.

45. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, book 1, chapter 31, paragraph 4.

46. Achtemeier, in Kimel (ed.), p. 8. A similar charge of pantheism is made by Harper ("On Calling God Mother," p. 295).
47. Ibid., p. 9.
48. Ibid., p. 10.
49. Ibid., p. 10.
50. Ibid. p. 10.
51. But, one might interject, this is precisely the way the Bible describes God's creative activity. See the above discussion on the birthing language of Deuteronomy 32:18.
52. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 293-94. This has been pointed out by Sally McFague in "God as Mother," in *Models of God*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 101.
53. The clause, "when properly understood," in this line is important lest I inadvertently ignore the historical fact that female imagery *is* typically associated with pantheistic theologies and male imagery with theistic theologies. One may then argue that, while the use of female imagery or the term "Mother" for God does not logically commit one to pantheism, the historical evidence suggests the danger of it. But this would only be a real danger if use of the mother image *supplanted* the traditional father image, rather than, as I am suggesting here, if its use were to remain *supplemental*.
54. Achtemeier, referring to the distinction drawn by Richard John Neuhaus between feminism as fairness and feminism as ideology, declares, "it is in relation to language *about God* that the feminists are most radically ideological" (in Kimel, ed., p. 3). See also Neuhaus, "The Feminist Faith," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 2 (April 1990), 60.
55. See Elizabeth Johnson's excellent summary of the literature on this issue and its major themes in *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 17-41.
56. On the importance of the prudent use of the hermeneutics of suspicion by Christian thinkers on their own beliefs and practices, see Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).
57. Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics" afterward to Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 231. On the workings of the will to power in religious communities, see Foucault's discussion of "pastoral power" in "The Subject and Power," (Dreyfus and Rabinow), p. 214.
58. On this point, see Sally McFague, "God the Father: Model or Idol?" in *Metaphorical Theology*, pp. 145-92.
59. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 40.
60. For an illuminating discussion of the nature of the conceptual idol, see Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, translated by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 7-52.
61. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 1, chapter xi, paragraph 8.
62. I wish to thank Barry Bandstra, Anthony N. Perovich, Jr., Caroline Simon and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments and suggestions.