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[21] Good treatments of this issue can be found in Langdon Gilkey, "Creationism: The Roots of the Conflict," *Christianity and Crisis* 26 April 1982: 108–15; and Robert Fisher, *God Did It, But How?* (Cal Media, 1982).

[22] Cf. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, p.22, for a discussion of the various senses in which the Bible is God's Word.

[23] There is an interesting analogy between Scripture and Jesus on this issue. The incarnation is not an account of Jesus taking on humanity in the abstract, but rather of Jesus becoming a particular first-century Jewish male of a certain height, weight, etc. And yet the essential meaning of the incarnation is not located in particularities such as height, weight, or (I think) gender.

[24] Dunn, "Authority of Scripture" p.207.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp.207–14.

[26] The precise understanding of this unity is a matter of much present discussion. See notes 4 and 5 above. For a particular application, see my "The New Quest and Christology," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* forthcoming.

[27] An excellent survey of these debates is Robert Price, "Inerrant the Wind: The Troubled House of North American Evangelicals," *Evangelical Quarterly* 55 (1983): 129–44.

[28] The most helpful evangelical treatment of this issue to date is Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (Zondervan, 1982), pp. 60–70.

Women's Realities: A Theological View

by Linda Mercadante

(Keynote address: "Women—Psychology and Theology" Conference, Mennonite Mental Health Services Annual Symposium, April 5-6, 1984, Fresno, CA)

Ever since I heard the theme of this conference and was asked to participate, I've been excited by the concept of bringing together Psychology and Theology in a supportive, interactive setting. I've been excited because these two fields—which often operate at such a distance from each other, and whose practitioners often view each other with such suspicion—really belong together. For psychology's main concern is to facilitate the wholeness of the person. Theology affirms that goal, and does so by redirecting our sights back to the One who has made us personal and who intends for us to be whole.

If there's one thing I've learned in my whole Ph.D. pilgrimage, its that theology is too important to be left to the experts. I want to stress this, because for too long women especially, but also many men, have felt there was a radical separation between their own experience in knowing God and the seemingly more abstract work known as theology.

But in fact, anyone who wants to know God, anyone who tries to understand their own religious experience, and anyone who embarks on a spiritual pilgrimage, struggling to discern the meaning of life, is already in some fashion doing theology. For all *good* theology grows out of the experience that people of faith had in receiving and interpreting God's self-revelation.

I will not pretend that theology in the past has generally served women well—for we all know it has not.

But I will affirm that whatever *good* theology there has been—and there certainly has been some—has always grown out of the experience of faith, the personal and communal reception of God's self-disclosure.

The problem is, however, that for far too long the woman's experience has not been considered "serious" or important enough to warrant careful theological consideration. For example: it's almost as though a map had been drawn listing just those places that men would likely frequent. Did you ever see one of those tourist maps that list all the places of interest in a certain city? Well, the state of theology now is like a map that lists just those sights that men would likely visit.

Of course some of these places would be very interesting to women, too, but they're not on this map, they have been left off. The map-makers considered them of minor importance, or perhaps didn't even take note of them. So, if you are a woman, this map, like much theology today, is only partially useful to you.

When male ministers, for example, talk about pride being the most deadly sin, they are talking about their own experience. Pride, in their experience, *is* the most serious problem, it is a matter of wanting to be in control, to be like God.

Valerie Saiving Goldstein has pointed out that pride is not women's chief problem—far from it. Instead, if we had to point to the chief failing of women, it would more likely be over-dependence upon things or persons never meant to carry that burden.

So if we want to change theology, if we want to change the map, we must begin to speak out about, write about, teach about and counsel out of our own experience, our own attempts to hear the gospel message, our own experience in knowing God.

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There is one very fundamental change that must be made in order to make this all possible. This change is foundational for all other changes. And that is a change in language, particularly our language and imagery for God.

Our culture is in the habit of using exclusively male language and imagery for God. I'd like to explain how we can introduce a theologically sound way to use feminine language and imagery for God. But before I do that, I want to stress that the way we use language is just as important as the language we use.

Several years ago the Presbyterian Church published a very interesting study on the power of language in liturgy and worship.[1] This study said that language functions like a window through which we see our life and surroundings.

Normally, this window is clear and we don't focus on it, but instead look through it. But when the glass gets dirty or cracked, we do start noticing it because it begins to distort our view of life and reality. And this is now the case with our language about God.

Because of the way we use language and imagery, we get into the bad habit of imagining God to be somehow masculine. The results of this, as we know, are often disastrous—not only in the way women have been made subordinate, but also in the way we have actually limited God.

Almost anyone with a little religious training or Sunday school can tell you God is not really a male, but a spirit. Many people now know that in the Bible there are striking examples of feminine imagery for God. Some people are also aware that in the history of the church, feminine imagery for God has been accepted and taught from time to time. But somehow, the message was distorted and there prevails in the culture and in the church the popular belief that God is somehow masculine.

The problem has come about for two reasons. First, we are stuck on a male image of God because the metaphors for God in the Bible and in the religious experience of Christians over the ages have been used and understood incompletely. There is clear warrant in Scripture for feminine imagery for God, and through the ages Christians have again and again envisioned God in feminine ways.[2] But because the culture was not receptive to these images, they were never used to their full extent.

Second, the problem is another huge example of the everlasting sin of idolatry. Feuerbach was partly right when he said that projection is a function of religion. Rather than letting God's reality correct the dominant culture, all too often the dominant culture has projected what it imagines or wants God to be. Mary Daly put it succinctly when she said, "If God is male, then the male is god."

At this point you might be thinking, "Even if there *is* some feminine imagery for God in the Bible and Christian tradition, hasn't it been—just in sheer volume—predominantly masculine?" I'd like to turn that question around. First, we all know the Scriptures were written and received into a very male-oriented set of cultures. Therefore, as Virginia Mollenkott says, the marvel is that so many feminine images for God actually got through that patriarchal mindset. It testifies loudly to the amazing power of God to self-communicate the divine image, no matter what the culture's particular blindness or sin is.

I don't find it so much a problem that Jesus was male, as much as I find it a challenge to our whole notion of gender stereotypes. For Jesus didn't come to image a supposed maleness in God. Instead, Jesus came to overturn, among other things, the terribly ingrained

sin of male superiority. By his radical behavior, which was quite unsterotypical, he judged that lie and other lies along with it.

You've noticed that I've been using the phrase "feminine imagery for God" quite a lot, but I haven't defined it. What does "feminine imagery for God" really mean? We have to think about this very carefully, for here is where the heart of the problem lies for those of us who want to make some decisive changes in theology, in the church and in the culture.

To put the matter simply, depending upon how we use feminine imagery, we will either help dispel the oppressive character of the gender stereotypes we have inherited, or we will reinforce these stereotypes and encourage their continuation.

So what does feminine imagery for God look like? Is it restricted to nurturing, giving birth, comforting, feeling? Is feminine imagery to be used only when talking about these qualities of God, but not when describing God's righteousness, perfect knowledge, power, judgement of evil and the other characteristics traditionally thought of as masculine? Doesn't this start sounding familiar, even though we are talking about imagery for God? Doesn't this sound like an old tune we thought we wouldn't have to sing anymore?

Depending on how we interpret and use feminine imagery for God, we may end up in a worse box than the one we're trying to break out of now. Even if we manage to get feminine imagery for God into our language, our worship, and our theology, we stand in danger of reifying, hardening the stereotypes. Because if a man is only seen as in God's image when he's being strong, and a woman is only seen as in God's image when she's being comforting, have we really changed anything? No, in fact we have made our straitjackets even tighter.

The additional danger is that we'll still rank these attributes, even though they are all in God, thus making the "masculine" ones primary, and the "feminine" ones secondary. This is already being done. One scholar, Donald Bloesch, in his book *Is the Bible Sexist?*, admits freely that there is feminine imagery of God in the Bible, but he wants it known that "the biblical God is primarily Father and . . . and other designations, especially those of a feminine character, are to be seen as secondary . . ." (p.121, n.38).

What does the Bible and Christian tradition actually say? It is true that many of the feminine images for God in Scripture and tradition are maternal, having to do with giving birth, with breastfeeding, with comforting. This was a major role of women when the Bible was written. Now these attributes of God are never ranked second. But there is more. For the characteristics are often used in revolutionary ways that actually challenge the stereotypes.

Virginia Mollenkott shows an interesting use of feminine imagery for God when God is likened to mother eagle. As you may know, the female eagle is stronger than the male. And so it is she who teaches the little eaglets to fly, doing this by balancing them on her wings, swooping down so they have to go it alone for a few seconds, and then catching them when they get tired. When God is likened to a mother eagle, then, we are presented with a God who personifies strength and the ability to teach her children the skills they need to survive in the world. Thus a feminine stereotype is broken.

In another place, God is likened to a determined woman who has lost a valuable coin and searches everywhere until she finds it. When she does, she throws a party for her friends. In this metaphor for God, we learn that women image God just as much, or more, when they are responsible for their own affairs, when they do not give up until they have reached their goal and when they share their resources with others, as when they conform to the gender stereotype of maternal behavior. We find, then, that when Scripture uses feminine imagery for God, it often does so in ways that contradict or revolutionize our own inherited stereotypes. Let's continue to search for the surprises behind feminine imagery for God.

It's very important to realize that in addition to dispelling stereotypes on the human side, what we are also trying to do by using feminine imagery for God is to dispel the distorted images we have of God. For even God has become stereotyped! To help people turn back to God, we must work to dispel these false views.

By using exclusively male language and imagery for God, we have in this age played into the Victorian father picture—the remote man whom everyone feared and called "sir," even his wife. By imposing this stereotype on God, we get the one-sided image of God the distant, immovable, stern judge, more transcendent than immanent, a God who lets you suffer to build character, and only promises to feed the hungry, free the oppressed and comfort the afflicted in the *next* life, where he awaits them after they've passed all their tests down here.

This is a distorted view. For while God *is* powerful, greater than this world of time and space, a righteous judge, and a builder of character, God is also closer to us than a sister, one who hears and responds, a comforter, a liberator, a mother, a friend and a lover.

The crucial factor is that in our enthusiasm to portray the latter set of God's attributes—the ones we feel have been neglected—we must be careful not to throw out the former. Of course, some of the former characteristics—the ones associated somehow with stereotypical maleness, such as transcendence and power, may have to be rethought and re-evaluated.

We can't say, on one hand, that God is static, immovable, and yet that God hears and responds to our prayers. But Scripture never said God was static. It said God is changeless in the sense of being always trustworthy, always loving, always righteous, always opposed to injustice—someone you can count on at all times.

I've been talking about expanding our vision of God by using gender-inclusive imagery. Maybe you're wondering why we don't just avoid the whole problem of stereotyping by using impersonal language for God. In fact, there is theological precedent for using at least some impersonal terms for God. For instance, we can draw on such biblical metaphors as God the rock of salvation, or God the consuming fire, or expand on descriptions of God as Love, Peace, and Justice.

We should continue and perhaps even increase our use of such language in order to break the hold of exclusively male language for God. But this is not a total solution. For the most important disadvantage in using only impersonal language is that all through the Bible, as well as through the history of Christian experience, God has been encountered in a profoundly *personal* way.

Maybe another solution has come to your mind. If impersonal language has only limited usefulness, how about using personal but non-gender specific language—that is, words for God that carry no gender—like Sustainer, Redeemer, and Creator.

This is another possible option, but it's also seriously limited. Because all persons as we know them are either "she" or "he." Of course God is a spirit, and therefore out of the realm of our experience with human beings. But even so, in a relationship as intimate as the one God desires to have with us, eventually personal pronouns become necessary—not just so that our language isn't awkward—but, more importantly, to insure that we do not think our relationship with God is any less personal and intimate than our human relationships.

There have been times when I've tried to use exclusively feminine imagery for God. I knew that theologically there was no more warrant to refer to God only as "she" than there was to use only masculine language. But I was excited about the feminine imagery I was seeing in Scripture and tradition and wanted to proclaim it.

I tried it once at an all-women's camp one summer up in Massachusetts and the results were exciting.

Most of the women were either from non-religious backgrounds or so alienated from their former traditions that even the word "church" made them angry. Yet when they were introduced to the biblical feminine images for God, many of them were surprised and delighted. There had been a real longing to renew the spiritual dimension of their lives, but they had been blocked by the exclusively masculine imagery.

I have also tried using just feminine imagery for God in more traditional settings. One time I was invited to give a lecture at a theological college in Berkeley. My topic was imagery for God, and I closed the lecture with a prayer I had written based solely on the feminine images for God in Scripture. After the lecture, people commented on how moving and freeing the experience had been for them. But one professor hung back, looking troubled. Finally he came up to me and said "Oh, I get your point now. I see what you mean. I got your message completely. I've never felt so oppressed and excluded in my life!"

While I had not intended to exclude anyone—that was the op-

posite of my message—we both learned something that day. He learned something of what women have felt all along. I learned that we must mix our metaphors carefully in order not to repeat the exclusivity we've been subjected to.

I want to share some of the specific ways we can introduce gender-inclusive language and imagery for God. First, search for the hidden examples of feminine imagery for God in the Bible and in Christian tradition. Don't be put off by the fact that past interpretations may not have brought all of this to light. Biblical scholars can be blinded by cultural prejudices just like anyone else—some people would say more so! But my book *From Hierarchy to Equality* makes it clear that we must always be wary of the cultural presuppositions of biblical interpreters. And that includes our own blindnesses. We are all bound up in our culture. The paradox is that unless we realize this, we actually limit God from speaking a fresh word to us.

Another suggestion: build on the cues the Bible and the history of our tradition have given us. You might have to look in unexpected places sometimes. The Shakers, for example, developed the concept of the Father-Mother God. I think the concept has potential as long as we make it clear we are not talking about two gods, but about one fully inclusive God. The parental image of God is still a good one, even though we need to augment it, because it not only points to the power of God, but it helps us trust a God who takes a loving parental interest in us.

But God is also a friend. Here is a place feminine imagery could be used effectively. The image of God as friend was developed especially well during the middle ages. One Cistercian, Aelred of Rievaulx, noted that the inner dynamic of friendship is one of equalizing. Real friends try to be on a par with one another. Jesus said he called us slaves no longer but friends. So we are actually being fashioned into God's friends—quite a mind-boggling idea.

Another place I see a strong theological avenue for feminine imagery is in our speaking and thinking of the Holy Spirit. Now I am most definitely *not* advocating that we should have "two "he's" and one "she"." But there is some real theological room here, because the Holy Spirit has been the least stereotyped of all three divine persons or "modes-of-being." The true identity of the Holy Spirit has eluded Christian thinkers, and they have tended to fuse the Spirit with the other two, sometimes calling the Spirit an energy or a bond of love. Yet because of the Spirit's anonymity and hiddenness, she is especially close to the role of hiddenness women in our culture have had to assume. And so here is a place we can seize the stereotype and revolutionize it.

But we must not focus solely on the Spirit as we introduce feminine imagery for God, or else we will end up with, as I put it rather crudely before, "two "he's" and a "she"," which is an equally distorted view of God, since it destroys the unity of the Godhead, the foundation of our faith.

The key issue as we open ourselves to feminine language and imagery for God is to reclaim our birthright—the depth and fullness of knowing God. For we have lost this treasure along with the loss of our own wholeness. By searching for the hidden aspects of God and bringing them to light, we will also bring the fullness of our own selves into the light.

So I urge to expand your knowledge of God. Begin to incorporate the feminine imagery for God into your worship, into your thinking and into your speaking. Recognize that since you are *already* doing theology—let it be *good* theology.

But be careful not to submit again to the yoke of bondage.

Because it is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

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[1] *The Power of Language Among the People of God and the Language about God "Opening the Door"* UPC (U.S.A.) 1979.

[2] Lady Julian of Norwich, 13th C.; Clement of Alex. (2nd C); John Chrysostum (4th C); (Mother hen imagery).

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

From Knowledge to Wisdom: The Seminary as Dining Hall

by Hal Miller

Theological education ought to be nourishing to the spirit. At least there are texts of Scripture which might give you that impression. Psalm 19 insists that the Law of the Lord makes the simple wise, gives joy to the heart, and tastes sweeter than honey (vv. 7, 8, and 10). A proverb says the one who finds wisdom and understanding is blessed, for these things are worth more than any material treasure (Prov.. 3:13–15). And 2 Timothy sees Scripture as a resource for wisdom and righteousness (3:15–16).

So, it's no surprise that many people enter seminaries with the expectation of gaining not merely knowledge, but wisdom as well. To be able to spend two (or three, or more) years studying the things of God—ah, truly blessed task, one which will surely nourish the spirit. This is not mere "secular learning"; this is pursuit of the very treasures of the kingdom.

Sometimes reality strikes in the middle of memorizing a Hebrew conjugation. Sometimes it invades when one is trying to see the difference between *posse non pecare* and *non posse pecare*. And sometimes it comes during an attempt to figure out a use of the genitive in some Pauline epistle. But whenever it comes, it comes as a shock. This is sweeter than honey? If this is the treasure of the kingdom, why don't I hear the jingle of coins in my pockets? With a jolt, you come to the realization that you might be gaining knowledge, but wisdom is nowhere involved.

That shock is a common part of seminary experience. No matter what goals and desires you entered seminary with, somehow the process of theological learning has turned dusty and dry. It has become so much rote, no different than learning social statistics or western civ. The days when you read the Bible with child's eyes have gone; now it is merely one more document to be mastered. When before you spent every spare hour immersed in theologies or commentaries, now you find yourself watching the clock anxiously, waiting until you can leave off studying with a minimum of guilt.

A good deal of any sensitive seminarian's time is spent trying to overcome this problem and integrate theological studies with spiritual life. I remember poring over lexical studies, spending hours amidst reference books, and wrestling with the likes of Moltmann, Bultmann, or Cullman, wondering what all this had to do with knowing God. The years I had pictured as glorious and sweet turned out to be just another parenthesis in life—something I had to get through so I could go on to what was really important.

Naturally, such a situation is as troubling to those watching the process as to those who experience it. Spouses, parents, pastors, and professors each in their own ways are disturbed by the lack of connection between theological education in America and the spiritual nurture which one can indicate by the word "wisdom.". Among the learned, this distress spawns ever renewed cries to integrate the spiritual with the intellectual in seminaries and theological schools. We all agree: wisdom needs to be added to our knowledge.

But what are the recommendations? Compulsory chapel attendance? Prayer before lectures? Stricter rules concerning lifestyle and deportment? Fine. But all these assume that the problem is merely an organizational one which can be solved by adding (or subtracting) one element or another from theological education. Unfortunately, such a strategy simply places two things—the intellectual and the spiritual—beside each other in the life of a seminarian. And that's not the same as integrating them.

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