

## **Mothers, Sons and God-Concepts**

When I was pregnant with my second child, I was also becoming more deeply immersed in feminist theological writings. I had hopes that maybe my second child would be a girl. I could share with her all my discoveries about the feminine face of God. I could encourage her to see the Divine in herself. We could go to women-church<sup>1</sup> gatherings and participate in mother/daughter Goddess circles together and share the knowledge that we, too, were created in the image and likeness of God. My second child, as well as my first, was a boy and so I had to come to terms with the fact that I was going to have the challenge of sharing my feminist religious consciousness with my sons.

The entrance of women into the fields of theology and religion, in recent years, has prompted a critique of traditional understandings of religious ideologies. Among other things, feminist theologians have questioned the interpretation of sacred texts (Trible, 1984; Fiorenza, 1994 (1983); Brenner and Fontaine, 1997), the exclusion of women from full participation in clerical and leadership roles within church structures, and most importantly, for my purposes, the language which is used to speak about God (Daly, 1973; Christ, 1979; Ruether, 1984; Carr, 1988; Johnson, 1992). In doing so they have exposed the way in which religious traditions, interpreted through a patriarchal lens, have oftentimes contributed to the oppression of women and children in church and society.

Male only God language, specifically, confuses Divine mystery with literal conceptions of a male, father-like God, reinforcing patriarchal control of women and children. Christianity, in particular, has been dominated by paternal metaphors for God. Although mothers, in general, are the primary caregivers for children, they are separated from the Divine image in a way that fathers are not. Elizabeth Johnson (1992) writes:

Feminist theological analysis of God makes it clear that the tenacity with which the patriarchal symbol of God is upheld is nothing less than violation of the first commandment of the decalogue, the worship of an idol. An idol is not necessarily a god in the shape of an animal, a golden calf or little statue with no breath that needs to be carried, as described in the Hebrew Scriptures. Rather, any representation of the divine used in such a way that its symbolic and evocative character is lost from view partakes of the nature of an idol. Whenever one image or concept of God expands to the horizon thus shutting out others, and whenever this exclusive symbol becomes literalized so that the distance between it and divine reality is collapsed, there an idol comes into being. Then the comprehensible image, rather than disclosing mystery, is mistaken for reality. Divine mystery is cramped into a fixed, petrified image. Simultaneously the religious impulse is imprisoned, leading to inhibition of the growth of human beings by the prevention of further seeking and finding. (39)

When I present the Divine to my sons, I do not want their religious impulses “imprisoned.” I want their image to be more open, more diverse, and less dogmatic than the one on which I was raised. In an already sexist society anything that reinforces male dominance such as male-only God images and concepts should be re-imagined. Trying to re-imagine God-image with our children is difficult. Because in Western culture, despite the work of prominent feminist theologians, God-concepts in popular imagination tend to remain almost exclusively male. In the following paper I will briefly examine my experience of God-image in popular imagination<sup>2</sup> and go on to discuss the ways in which I have tried to broaden the God-concepts of my own children.

### **God-image in popular imagination**

In my own personal experience of having volunteered for different sorts of children’s ministry within my own church (Roman Catholic), from religious education instructor to coordinator of children’s liturgy, and having been a participant in classes which instruct religious educators, I have observed the hesitancy of adults, who teach children, to embrace anything other than a male image of God. A woman in one of my classes conceded that while God was probably male, He presumably had some feminine characteristics. At a large conference for religious educators that I frequently attend, I overheard a woman complaining about a workshop leader who had advocated inclusive language (i.e., alternating the pronouns “he” and “she” when referring to God) in liturgical music. She said that everyone knew that God was male and that the workshop leader was just trying to stir up trouble. The irony of her attitude, I hope, is not lost. A lesbian woman I know, who, with her partner, is raising a daughter, overheard me talking with our pastor about using inclusive language in the liturgy and expanding images of God. She pulled me aside afterwards and



*Judy Martin, "Mothering," 1998,  
Dyed felt, printed and painted papers,  
embroidery floss, 14" x 20"*

the scriptural readings and responses for liturgy). Celebrants of liturgy are referring to "Mother /Father God," although they are probably not the norm. And, increasingly, women in many denominations (not my own, however) are being ordained and bringing a fresh look to the altar, forever changing the face of religious authority to many children. Marcus Borg (1997) relates a story that captures this change when he talks about the image his wife, an Episcopal priest, sends to children:

Among the people kneeling at the altar rail was a four-year-old girl, looking up expectantly at my wife's face as she bent down to give her a piece of bread. My wife has a beautiful face and a wonderful smile. As I watched the little girl, I suddenly wondered if my wife's face was filling her visual screen and being imprinted in her mind as an image of God, much as the face of the male pastor from my childhood had

told me that it had never occurred to her that the "father-language" she uses to teach her daughter about God would not have any relational significance for her as she was being raised by two mothers.

This unconscious adoption of male God language may be changing. The past twenty years or so of feminist scholarship in religion and theology may at some level be affecting the way in which people think about God. Despite the overwhelmingly spontaneous use by subjects of male God language in their study on androcentric God-language, Foster and Keating (1992) found that a small percentage of their subjects, when talking about God, used inclusive pronouns (he/she), used no gender specific pronouns, or referred to God as "It." Within my own tradition, more enlightened editors of religious education texts, have begun using gender neutral language when speaking directly about God. Many congregations are choosing to use inclusive language lectionaries (i.e., the books within which are

been imprinted on mine. And I was struck by the difference: an image of God as a male authority figure shaking his finger at us versus an image of God as beautiful loving woman bending down to feed us. Of course I do not know what was happening in that little girl's mind, but the difference in images is dramatic. In that difference, something is at stake for both men and women. (71)

### **Re-thinking God-concepts with my children**

My husband called God, "He" (a rare event because he usually uses totally non-anthropomorphic metaphors in discussions of the Divine, the Unknown, the Meaningful, etc.). My six-year-old son turned to him and said, "God is not just 'He.' God can be 'He' or 'She.' God can be both." When playing with one of his friends from across the street, he called God, "She," when his friend brought God into their conversation. Incidents like this warm the cockles of my feminist religious heart. He had actually been listening to me on the few occasions that we discussed my concept of the Divine. His four-year-old brother, with whom I have had fewer conversations, calls God, "He." He also calls his friend Julia, "he", so perhaps in his case it is a pronoun problem. While I do not have a dogmatic aversion to the pronoun "he" in relation to the God, I do have an aversion to God always and exclusively being referred to as "He". One of the reasons I call the God, "She," to my sons is because I know in every other instance in which they hear talk about God, it will be in exclusively male terms. In church, in popular culture (e.g., the Sunday funnies, the disembodied male god-voice in television commercials), and in conversations with peers God language and image is almost exclusively male. God concepts in the majority of children and adults, still remain predominantly male.

My own experience of re-imagining God did not come until I turned thirty. Working as a scientist for a large pharmaceutical company had raised my feminist consciousness. Being a woman in a male-dominated field is not always easy and being referred to as "one of the girls in the lab" started becoming annoying. Yet even as my feminism was developing in relationship to my career, my relationship to my religious life still remained unquestioned. I had always been a practicing Roman Catholic and not just nominally. After twelve years of Catholic school, I became an active participant in Catholic campus ministry at the large secular university I attended. As an adult I have been a Eucharistic minister and lector at Mass, a religious education instructor, and have held various other volunteer functions, as needed. Two things forever changed my perception of my faith life and they happened almost simultaneously, discovering feminist theology and having children.

While pregnant with my first son, on my commute home from work, I heard a radio interview with a woman, Mary Jo Weaver, a Catholic feminist theologian, who was promoting her most recent book (Weaver, 1993), and it shook my whole belief system. While on maternity leave, I read her book and many of the books mentioned in her bibliography. When I gave birth to my son,

I was not prepared for the intense feelings of fierce protectiveness and overwhelming love for this tiny person that enveloped me, and it gave new meaning to the idea of God as mother that I had been reading about. Not returning to work and going back to study Feminist Spirituality<sup>3</sup> at a graduate level, further reinforced the idea that re-imagining God is a crucial tool in undermining the patriarchal language and symbols associated with Divine mystery. Carol Christ (1979) writes, “symbols have both psychological and political effects, because they create the inner conditions.... that lead people to feel comfortable with or accept social and political arrangements that correspond to the symbol system” (274).

That being the case, it is important what we tell our children about God. David Wolpe (1993) writes, “all children, even those from nonreligious homes, develop images of God. It is our responsibility to help them develop those ideas in a way that is constructive and true both to the traditions we value and to what we know about the world” (26).

When I first introduced the concept of God to my older son, I pondered over how I could approach the subject. What parts of the God concept did I want to introduce first? I certainly was not going to start with the “Our Father” as my own mother had with me. When he was about three years old we were sitting outside our house on a grassy slope and I decided to try telling him about God being present in everything. I told him God was in the trees and the flowers and the grass. I told him that God was in him and in me. I told him She loves us and protects us and is always around. He responded, “Oh, God is like Mommy.” He was very comforted by this idea. I also tried this approach with his younger brother who immediately became distressed. “What’s wrong?” I asked. “I don’t want God to be in the trees and the flowers,” he responded. So the same approach does not always work with all children.

Despite my obvious displeasure with exclusively male God language and patriarchal symbol systems, I am still a practicing Catholic. Also, there are a lot of things about the tradition that I really love and want to share with my sons. I do not make my children come to Mass with me (my husband, who does not participate in any organized religion, stays home with them), but my older son often asks to come. We discuss anything he asks about afterwards.

I have chosen not to put my sons into a formal religious education program mainly because I do not know all the people who might teach them. Religious education in the Catholic Church, unless one goes to Catholic school, is basically carried out by volunteers. Though well meaning, most have very little formal religious training and next to none (including some parish directors of religious education) are aware that feminist theology even exists. I have instead chosen to teach them about God with a group of books that my oldest son has named “God-books.” They are by no one author but are books that I have come across in libraries and book stores which are specifically about God but whose authors have chosen unique ways to talk about God. They use inclusive language for God (i.e., alternating he/she for God or using gender-neutral

language) and their illustrations depict the diversity of humankind.

*Old Turtle*, (Wood, 1992), is one of my favorite theologies of the Sacred. It teaches children, using the voices of all creation (e.g., mountains, trees, animals, etc.), that there are many ways to think about God and that we should respect them all. It also has a deep ecological message about respect for the earth. *Where Does God Live?*, (Bea, 1997), teaches children that God is present in the world:

You know God made everything, seen and unseen,  
The wind and the sun and the meadows so green.  
Flowers and stars and oceans of blue.  
Trees, birds, and rocks, and all people, too.  
And when God makes a person, a star, or a wave,  
A part of God stays with whatever God's made.

"Little boys and men equally need the balance which feminine imagery meditation provides, for their spiritual breadth has also been stunted by the predominance of masculine imagery (9)," write the authors of *Heart Talks with Mother God* (Meehan *et al.*, 1995). This book introduces to children, through meditative images, the idea that feminine imagery (particularly maternal imagery) for the Divine is as acceptable as masculine imagery. Finally, *In God's Name* (Sasso, 1994), introduces children to the different ways people name God, using anthropomorphic images (e.g., mother, father) and non-anthropomorphic images (e.g., rock, source of light). These are just a few of the "God-books" I have discovered. When my sons get older I will have to think of more sophisticated ways to discuss God. Also, as a Christian, I will have to think of ways to address the whole idea of Jesus. So far we have talked about Christmas and Easter. My explanation of the resurrection elicited the response "cool" from my older son. It is a start.

I do not know what the long-range effect will be of teaching my sons diverse images of God. I could find no studies out there that were titled "Men Raised with Diverse God-concepts and Their Attitude Towards Women." All I know is that men, whom I have met, who have embraced female images of God are also strongly aware of the effects of sexism on society.

My older son keeps me humble, though. When I ask him what he wants to read before bed he says, "Anything but the God-books." "Why," I ask. "Me and Daddy, we aren't as interested in God as you are."

I suppose, for the time being, that is acceptable, too.

<sup>1</sup>Women-church is a movement throughout North America of Christian women who have chosen to gather and create women-centered liturgy and ritual.

<sup>2</sup>A section which contained in-depth research on God-concepts has been

edited from the text published here due to space constraints. The full text of the paper can be found on my web site, <http://ourworld.cs.com/aileenfitzke>.<sup>3</sup>I study at Immaculate Heart College Center in Los Angeles. It is the only institution in the U.S. which offers a Masters specifically in feminist spirituality.

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