

On theological tics and the roots of metaphors

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For 2000 years Christianity has been conceptually shaped and organized by men. Men powered by their gender, not necessarily overt political power but by the pervasive and indisputable power of one specific gender having power over another. This is a fact as universal as it is invisible. It's the water fish swim in and don't see or the oxygen that keeps us mammals going without us giving it a second thought. ¹⁺²

Men have penned all the tracts from all the church councils throughout history about what men decided and wrestled with in their quest to formulate what the words and fate of this strange son of a carpenter might mean.

Men who have never experienced a monthly pulse of blood, fatigue, pain and the disgust and taboo that surrounds menstruation. Men who have never had to fear the merciless potentiality of conception after lovemaking - or following rape and abuse. Men who have never experienced another living being like a butterfly wing inside their own bodies. Men who have never experienced another living being taking up residence inside one's body although that is the last thing one wants (and being forced to not terminate the pregnancy because the law - written by men - makes it illegal). Men who have never had their health, body and future fertility (or their very life) destroyed by illegal abortions.

Men who have never experienced the bodily fact that giving birth to another living creature is done at the risk of potential death. Men who have never experienced giving birth to this new being and putting her or him to their breast and feeling the tautness of the milk flowing as a lifegiving thing into the eager mouth of a tiny human seeking nourishment, warmth, and security. Men who have never gone through body-wrecking labour only to have a lifeless child put into one's arms or simply removed before having a chance to even see it. Or to have a living child removed in the same way because the mother - usually young - was forced to give it up. Men who have never experienced the volcanic force of hormones pulsing through the body post-partum causing a stormy sea of fierce

¹ This applies not only to Christianity, of course, but to all major religious movements on a global scale. Christianity grew out of the deeply patriarchal roots of Judaism and of Greek and Roman philosophy.

² “When you are criticizing the philosophy of an epoch, do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary explicitly to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the various systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them.” —Whitehead, Alfred North (1926) *Science and the Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. S. 61

protectiveness, tenderness, raging love, unbelievable stamina, potential rage (against threats) like a mother bear's lethal rage upon threats to her young (Hosea 13,8a). Men who have never had to stay awake for many nights, weeks, or months if the child is ill or simply not sleeping. Men who have always had the option of getting up and walking away from crying babies, soiled nappies, snotty noses, vomit and scraped knees and into the real world where all the important stuff goes on that men must deal with. Men who have never gone through menopause, uncontrollable hot flashes and irregular and often massive and extensive bleeding and other equally baffling and unpredictable bodily symptoms. Men who early in the developing movement of Christianity quickly emphasized abhorrence of the body and of women, the two often seen as synonymous in their unpredictability and noisy, tiring, everchanging and uncontrollable reality.

What image of God and what perceptions of divine and human interaction have arisen out of this biological reality? What image of God and what perceptions of divine and human interaction could have interwoven the centuries of councils, tracts, dictums, and the endless volumes of systematic theology had this female bodily and unnegotiable reality been present?

We must assume that it would be very different. In as much as the metaphors for the ineffable (all theology consists of some combination of metaphors or other) would have grown out of a very different way of experiencing and being in the world and of perceiving oneself in the world. As when we remember that the word for mercy in Hebrew shares the same root as the word for womb. God's mercy - God's womb.

We must assume that something as fundamental to Christianity as the metaphor of God as a parent would then naturally entail perceiving God as mother on a totally equal footing to that of father. Which would mean not having to carry and perpetuate throughout the centuries and in every single church service to this day the theological tic: "God, He..."

A thought experiment: Had the theological tic for the last 2000 years been: "God, She..." men might have felt a tad under-represented and invisible. This is of no importance, though, or has no relevance (that is, it's invisible, not registered) when it's about women. And we must ask the fundamental question: "How can women be in the image of God if God cannot be imaged in female form?"³

If at this point a chorus of male (theological) voices were to shout indignantly that no male on this planet can be held responsible for having been born male, I would most certainly agree with them. That is not the point, though. My point is that the metaphors, the theological metaphors that might have grown out of the reality of female bodies and thus might have created a greater variety in the theological *Sprachspiel* (Language games) - and hence in our understanding of God and of ourselves - throughout the history of systematics and church history, do not exist. Or if they do, as when God is portrayed as a woman in labour or as breastfeeding, or as fierce as a mother bear etc., these images have not been encoded into the DNA of theological thinking.

Throughout history patriarchal power has twisted an unforgiving, strong, and mostly fully invisible rope that keeps both women and men in place. We can't see these ropes; they uphold the theological corners of the world as we have inherited them, and they seem indisputably normal and natural. We

³ Marcus J. Borg: *The God We Never Knew. Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*. San Francisco, HarperCollins 1997 p. 70.

might in a generous mood acquiesce that God could - also - hold feminine qualities. This poses new problems, though: It cements the dichotomy that God is fundamentally male but might also on odd occasions don so-called female qualities (i.e., be meek and mild - tuck his, well her, children under her warm and protective wings, say). On God's regular workdays, though, God reverts to being what God really is: "God, He..."⁴

Throughout church history (in the Western world) the female body was allowed to appear in one particularly well defined category: The virgin mother. The uncontrollable, unpredictable female body was cut and sized into a manageable template: The ever accessible, understanding, caring, amenable, self-sacrificing, static, meek, mild, and gentle female. Certainly, deeply unthreatening and in no way unsettling. Most images of Mary depict her as literally functioning as a cushion for the main character to sit on. Whether to laugh or cry at this only way of legitimizing a female presence, a female body, near the Holy Male, I don't know. But at least she was present throughout the history of the Catholic Church. As were the great women saints and mystics: Hildegard of Bingen, Therese of Avila, Clara of Assisi, Catherine of Sienna, Birgitta of Vadstena (and others). Presumably, they were allowed to have a voice and be visible because the image of a creature with a female body remained in the collective theological consciousness.

Come the Reformation, the patriarchal, all male reality takes full sway: Women disappear from view. Male is all you get: The Father, The Son, and the Holy Ghost. No Mary, no Sophia, no women saints. Witch trials- and burnings reached their all-time high in Europe from the period of the Reformation and onwards. What wasn't incinerated, was reduced to something infinitely more manageable - the uncontrollable body was reduced to one organ: The Ear that Hears the Word. That is the only thing needed to connect you with the (male) God. It hardly gets more clinical and controllable than that.

Hang on: Luther loved his Käthe, enthusiastic followers of Luther might object at this point, and they might add: And women were valued so much more compared to catholic times. Well. Luther loved his Käthe, it is true, and her purpose in life was - as was the purpose of all women, seen and defined by these male reformers - to bear children and keep house, as her ample hips and buttocks indicate so clearly (said the great Luther). Show me any great women protestant theologians along the lines of the great catholic medieval women and I shall only be so happy. I don't know of any (that don't belong to much more recent times).

Patriarchy is never more victorious than when we don't register it and it seeps into the DNA of both women and men. As in the Uncle Tom trope depicted in Tarantino's *Django Unchained* that takes place in the Antebellum South and in which the old black house slave, Stephen, seems to have completely incorporated his master's way of perceiving his fellow slaves as subhuman. Women can indeed be ardent co-bearers of systemic male power. Perhaps because we are blind⁵. And possibly deaf to boot: More than half (58 %) of the ministers in the Danish State Church are women. And in every church service we get in front of the alter wearing the black, medieval male garb, open our

⁴ "If God is male, then male is God. The divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination." *Mary Daly (2015). "Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation", p.40, Beacon Press*

⁵ As am I – as a middle class white woman, myopic around my own being in the world compared to the reality of my BIPOC sisters and their theologies and living faith. Which is why I must keep reading womanist, mujerista and Asian feminist theology to call out my myopia.

mouths and say: "God, He.." The ministers in the Danish Church, women, and men, are bound by a seemingly inviolable strand of confessional theology written into the very constitution of Denmark. This tract - *Confessio Augustana* - written by men as were all theological tracts and binding bulls - depicts an image of God as a despotic, vengeful male figure that only deigns interacting with his creatures if blood is shed in transactional sacrifice. Our hymnal is chuck-full of worship songs that reiterate this fundamental transaction: How deplorable we humans are and how infinitely good God is that He even looks at us let alone bothers to arrange the Great Transaction for our benefit. Most worship songs stumble upon themselves to emphasize either our deplorableness or God's greatness - or preferably both.

In the baptismal prayer (there is only one authorized baptismal prayer in the book of the order of service for the Danish church) we are told that we *become* the children of God in baptism, that is: We are not so from simply having been born or created. In the wording of the eucharist there is an equally clear message: A transaction has now taken place in some shape or form, and we may therefore (and only then and therefore) stand before the face of our Maker.

If this kind of thinking was transferred to a woman who had just given birth, it would entail her saying to her infant: You are not quite my child - *yet*. Something else must take place (apart from me having carried you in my womb for 9 months and laboured mightily to push you into the world). Or if a distressed child came to her parent seeking warmth and security, the parent would reply: Hang on, you must understand that what undergirds our way of relating to each other is a transaction that you must fully understand and accept and reckon with. You can't just come running to me as you are. Who do you think you are - the prodigal son, perhaps?

It matters where theological metaphors come from. All metaphors grow out of the soil of some kind of bodily reality or other. They are stalks, leaves and flowers nourished by the root system of the physicality of the body in the world. All of us, women, and men, are relentlessly tied to the patriarchal reality that male bodies have been the only legitimate bodies out of which theological metaphors grew. So:

*Houston, we have a problem...**

(*The 1995 film *Apollo 13* used the slight misquotation "Houston, we have a problem", which had become the popularly expected phrase, in its dramatization of the mission. The phrase has been informally used to describe the emergence of an unforeseen problem, often with a sense of ironic understatement.)