

God's Radical Mastectomy!

"We believe in one God, the Father the Almighty...

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father...

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.

He has spoken through the prophets.¹

In this God: "We believe" and "His kingdom will have no end!" God in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, our blessed Trinity. As we proclaim our faith in the words of the Nicene, Apostles', or (heaven forbid) the Athanasian creeds we proclaim a particular image of the Triune God. For generations, a majority of Christians have assumed all three persons in this Trinity are male. Until recently this assumption has resulted in the exclusive use of male images, symbols and pronouns to represent the Triune God which Christians worship. God has been declared to be male. This is not an easy declaration to make. In order to make such a declaration, many of God's attributes which are revealed in the biblical accounts have been eradicated from the Christian tradition.

Long before the Christian church began to formulate its exclusively male image of the triune God, the Hebrew people used several words to refer to God. The earliest of these words is "*El*" which is the generic Semitic word for a god. Modern Bible translations translate *El* as "God".

The Hebrew word *Elohim* is also used in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is a combination of the generic term for a god and the plural feminine form of the word for "majesty". The Hebrew word *Elohim* may be the result of a broadening of the generic *El* to include an ancient Semitic female god *Eloah*.² In modern English translations *Elohim* is translated as

¹Nicene Creed. Lutheran Book of Worship. (Philadelphia: Augsburg Publishing, 1978) 64.

²Jann Aldredge Clanton, In Whose Image? (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 55.

"Lord" which fails to capture or eradicates *Elohim's* combination of sexual images for God.

El Shaddai is used as the name for God six times in the book of Genesis (17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25). The Hebrew "*El Shaddai*" can be translated: "She Who Has Breasts". Although translators remain unsure as to the meaning of *Shaddai*, two possibilities have been suggested with regard to the origin of the word. *Shaddai* comes from the root *shadu* which can be translated as both breast and mountain which leads to the translations of *El Shaddai* as "god with breasts" or "god of the mountains".³ Convincing arguments can be made for both translations. However, when the context within which *El Shaddai* is used is taken into consideration, "god with breasts" seems more in keeping with God's role in the text. "All of the passages using *El Shaddai* in Genesis, with one exception are fertility blessings."⁴

Genesis 17:1-2⁵: "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am *El Shaddai*⁶; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."

Genesis 28:3: "May *El Shaddai* bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples."

Genesis 35:11: "God said to him, "I am *El Shaddai*: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you."

Genesis 48:3-4: "And Jacob said to Joseph, "*El Shaddai* appeared to me at Luz

³David Biale, "The God With Breasts: *El Shaddai* in the Bible" in History of Religions, Vol.21; Feb.82; 249.

⁴Ibid. 247.

⁵Biblical quotations are from the, New Revised Standard Version Bible, 1989.

⁶Here and in the following, I have replaced "God Almighty" with "*El Shaddai*". and "Almighty" with "*Shaddai*".

in the land of Canaan, and she blessed me, and said to me, 'I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers; I will make of you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your offspring after you for a perpetual holding.'"

Genesis 49:25: "by the God of your father, who will help you, by *El Shaddai* who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb."

Despite the obvious connection between fertility and breasts,⁷ most biblical translators choose not to translate *El Shaddai* as "She Who Has Breasts", but as "God Almighty".

As to why male translators of the Hebrew text would translate "She Who Has Breasts" into English as "God Almighty," we can only guess. One wonders if these male translators weren't uncomfortable with the notion of God having breasts. Their translation has the effect of a radical mastectomy on our image of God.

"*Rechem*" in Hebrew means "womb" and is the root of the Hebrew words for "mercy" and "merciful". Whenever the word "*rechem*" is used to describe God's love it is translated into English as "compassionate love". Some translators have suggested that a more accurate translation would be "womb-like love" or "motherly love". However, a hysterectomy seemed to be more in keeping with the radical cut and slash approach of the male translators and by the flick of a scribe, *El Shaddai* loses her womb.

Despite the fleeting images of God as a woman in labour (Isa.42:14); a nursing mother (Num.11:11-14, Isa.49:15); a comforting mother (Isa.66:12-13); a fierce mother bear (Hos.13:6-8); etc., the overwhelming image of God in the Hebrew Scriptures is male. Not surprisingly the people of God created an idol in the form of the Father, which reflected and reinforced their own patriarchal culture. Christianity was born into this patriarchal culture where the image of God the Father stood proudly at the head of a patriarchal

⁷A further connection could be made to the similarities between the physical form of mountains or mounds in the Middle-East and breasts.

hierarchy.⁸

Considering the prevailing social conditions that were reflected and reinforced by the image of God the Father, it is indeed fortunate that the incarnation is embodied in a male. Despite the fact that God in Christ took on humanity (*anthropos* and not *aner*), it seems that it is Christ's particular embodiment of humanity, that is Christ's maleness, that is the image that best serves to reflect and reinforce the patriarchal structure of Christ's body, the Church.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we find the Holy Spirit referred to nearly 400 times using the Hebrew word "*ruach*" which is a feminine noun for breath, wind or spirit. "Like Wisdom (*chokma*), the Spirit (*ruach*) is feminine in nature...the power of the Spirit--She--was made masculine for the first time by translation into Latin and Germanic thought".⁹ Although fleeting images of the Holy Spirit's feminine nature can be traced in various Christian communities, a majority of Christian theologians speak of the Holy Spirit as masculine in nature.

The Trinity, God in three persons, is expressed as three male persons; "God the Father the Almighty", "Jesus Christ the only Son of God" and "the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son". The expression of the Trinity as three male persons is not in and of itself wrong. Men are indeed created in the image of God and maleness can and indeed should be used as a symbol for God. However, the

⁸The argument that "Father" is not to be understood as "*pater familias*" and that the "fatherhood" of God is not by creation, but in Christ (see Robert Kelly, "Theologia Crucis" (Waterloo: WLS, 1994), 154-155) may solve the problem for a few who have been theologically trained. However, the majority of Christians remain submerged in "ignorance of the doctrine of the Trinity" and continue to assume that God is "Father" both because God "created us" and because "we are sisters and brothers to Jesus".

⁹Jurgen Moltmann, "God With the Human Face" in Humanity in God by Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel & Jurgen Moltmann (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1983), 101.

tenaciously exclusive use of male symbols for God has reached the point of idolatry. For: In spite of the tradition's insistence on the radical incomprehensibility of God; in spite of the teaching that all words for God, being finite, fall short of their intended goal; and in spite of the presence of many names, images, and concepts for the divine in the Scripture and later Christian tradition, this tradition has lifted up the patriarchal way of being human to functional equivalence with the divine. More solid than stone, more resistant to iconoclasm than bronze, seems to be the ruling male substratum of the idea of God cast in theological language and engraved in public and private prayer."¹⁰

Christian tradition has created an idol that reflects and reinforces the patriarchal society into which it was born.

It can be argued that even though the attempt to express the inexpressible that is the Triune God, is made using male images, that this does not mean that God is in fact male. However, insisting that the Trinity is a symbol that points beyond itself to something else, to that which is inexpressible, does not solve the problem of how this symbol functions. The symbol of the Creator functions, the symbol of Christ functions, the symbol of the Holy Spirit functions. If exclusively male language is used to express these symbols there is an impact upon the various functions of these symbols.

Paul Tillich suggests that:

"If God is symbolized as 'Father', he is brought down to the human relationship of father and child. But at the same time this human relationship is consecrated into a pattern of the divine-human relationship. If 'Father' is employed as a symbol for God, fatherhood is seen in its theonomous, sacramental depth...If a segment of reality is used as a symbol for God, the realm of reality from which it is taken is, so to speak, elevated into the realm of the holy"¹¹

¹⁰Elizabeth A. Johnson. She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse. (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 40.

¹¹Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology. 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) vol.1:240-241.

The use of exclusively male images to symbolize God has gone further than simply elevating the male to the realm of holy. The use of exclusively male images to symbolize God has produced an attitude which serves not only to reinforce the kyriarchal structure of both the church and the culture, but which also, as Mary Daly has insisted, fosters the notion that, "if God is male, then the male is God".¹² The idolization of the male as representative of divinity is blasphemous. "It is idolatrous to make males more 'like God' than females."¹³

The symbol of God as male as it is expressed in "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" functions both in the lives of Christians and in society. Exclusively male symbols for God have distinctly negative effects in the lives of women and have helped to entrench male dominance in society. The worship of this male idol which Christian tradition has substituted for God has had, and continues to have, profound implications for the ways in which the Christian Gospel is proclaimed.

From the beginning, Christianity and patriarchy have been closely intertwined. Patriarchy is a term used to describe a social organization marked by the supremacy of the male. Patriarchy is modeled after clan or family organization principles which held to the supremacy of the father. In patriarchy the male is seen to be the normative way of being human and the female is secondary and derivative of the male. Patriarchal notions of the supremacy of the male have led to social structures that foster male dominance and female subordination. Patriarchy systematically dominates, oppresses and subordinates women.¹⁴

¹²Mary Daly. Beyond God the Father. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

¹³Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 23.

¹⁴Pamela Dickey Young. Christ in A Post-Christian World. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 4.

Kyriarchy is a term coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza to replace the term patriarchy. Kyriarchy emphasizes "the rule of the emperor/master/lord/father/husband of his subordinates". Fiorenza argues for a "different understanding of patriarchy, one which does not limit it to the sex/gender system but conceptualizes it in terms of interlocking structures of domination, i.e., elite male, relations of ruling". I shall use the term kyriarchy rather than patriarchy in order to recognize that not all males are patriarchal, some males suffer under patriarchy, not all females are opposed to patriarchy, and some females benefit from patriarchy.¹⁵

Christianity adopted as its own the kyriarchal systems and structures into which it was born. Often, the ways in which the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been proclaimed have reflected and reinforced kyriarchy. Christianity has treated women as secondary and derivative of men. Christianity has insisted on the supremacy of the male over the female and instructed women to keep silent. Christianity has defined roles for women that describe women in terms of their relationships to men as wives, mothers, virgins or whores. Christianity has failed to treat women in their own right as full human beings.

I am a feminist. I am also committed to the struggle to emancipate women and men from the oppressive domination of kyriarchy. I am committed to the struggle for political, economic and social equality of women and men. My feminist commitments grew as a result of my Christian faith. My earliest encounters with Christianity were with the stories of the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth. The ethics I learned from these encounters helped me to see the injustice of a kyriarchal system that refused equality on the basis of gender.

I am a Christian feminist. As a Christian feminist, I have to face the fact that the

¹⁵see: Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's: Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet (New York: Continuum 1994), 14 and But She Said, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 8.

Christian tradition is kyriarchal. The exclusive use of male language to express the nature of God has fostered a kind of literalism that reflects and reinforces kyriarchy. I believe that it is both necessary and possible to articulate and proclaim the Gospel in ways that do not reflect and reinforce the oppressive domination of kyriarchal systems.

The way in which the Gospel is proclaimed has an impact upon the community. The way we speak and/or enact the Gospel in stories, texts, institutions, liturgies, and creeds reveals our understanding about the nature of God. The way we speak about God is directly related to the kind of community we are. Speaking moulds the identity of our community and directs our praxis. This makes the use of inclusive language for God a powerful tool in the work of re-imagining God and our communities.