

# IS GOD EXCLUSIVELY A FATHER?

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William Harper presents five reasons for concluding that God should be referred to exclusively in male terms. To the contrary, I argue that: (1) by devaluating the feminine gender, Harper is guilty of the same reductionist and dichotomous thinking as his protagonists, (2) Harper's view of God is contrary to "the Biblical example," and (3) Harper's position rests on a number of logical confusions. I conclude that Harper's view should be rejected by both men and women of Christian convictions.

In his article "On Calling God 'Mother'," William Harper argues against feminists who depict God in female terms, or "at least as mixed with male terms."<sup>1</sup> He uses five reasons to demonstrate that Christian philosophers should refer to God exclusively with male attributes:

- (1) Some feminists assume an objectionable view of maleness.
- (2) Some feminists connect their interests with an ecological imperative, thereby introducing pantheistic elements into Christian belief.
- (3) Some feminists assume a "gender-dualistic paradigm" which falls prey to the fallacies of reductionism and false dichotomy.
- (4) Empirical evidence does not support the contention that Goddess worship will lead to improved social conditions for women.
- (5) The Biblical example gives sufficient grounds for referring to God exclusively in male terms.

My response to Harper will maintain a moderate position between his views and those of the feminists whom he critiques.

The issues raised by Harper are very important. According to Genesis 1:27, God fashioned the human race in His own image, and in so doing, He created both the male and female genders. It would seem to follow that both men and women possess significant characteristics that somehow retain a likeness to the divine, even if presently marred by sin. However, Harper informs us that "God reveals Himself exclusively in male terms..."<sup>2</sup> Thus, although both genders are made in the divine image, Harper's God manifests Himself in such a manner that only one gender (namely, the male) could ever come to some awareness of what its divine likeness entails. Presumably the other sex (namely, the female) is destined forever to be deprived of such knowledge, or at least to receive its awareness from sources other than Harper's God.



Both I and Harper would disagree with a Goddess worshipper like Carol P. Christ, but she at least compels us to view this situation from a feminine perspective:

A woman...can never have the experience that is freely available to every man and boy in her culture, of having her full sexual identity affirmed in the image and likeness of God.<sup>3</sup>

Christ is not discussing some alleged inability on the part of women to relate to an all-male deity. Women have been relating to men from the beginning of the human race, and they are more than capable of sustaining relationships with an all-male God. The (supposed) deprivation of women does not reside in a relationship, but rather in a perceived identity or likeness. Women (as women) can relate to, but never be like, an all-male God. Men, on the other hand, can both relate to, and experience similarities with, such a deity. Thus, if Christ is correct, Harper's God effectively disenfranchises half of the human race from certain aspects of religious experience. Given the possibility of such a conclusion, the issues raised by Harper are certainly important and worthy of further investigation.

### I.

Harper's first reason may assume an objectionable view of fatherhood. He cites Sara Ruddick and Sallie McFague as examples of feminists who assign positive qualities to motherhood, supposedly at the expense of affirming these qualities for fathers. Protesting that fatherhood also entails positive attributes, Harper draws a zealous conclusion:

There is no need to begin using female terms for God if the sole purpose of doing so is to import such positive notions as preserving love, growth, and socialization. All of these qualities are fully expressed in the term 'father.' To deny that is simply to resort to a narrow stereotype of male parenthood.<sup>4</sup>

I agree that fathers are capable of expressing such positive attributes as love, growth, and socialization. However, if these qualities are *fully* expressed in the term 'father,' can we infer that other terms (like 'mother,' for example) have nothing of significance to add to these properties? By using the terms 'fully expressed,' Harper may be guilty of the same tactic as his protagonists. He assigns positive attributes to one gender at the expense of the other.

I believe that a more moderate view would see both fathers and mothers as capable of expressing significant aspects of love, growth, and socialization. Since neither gender can "fully express" such properties, each needs the other for purposes of enhancement and completion. Thus, denying "full expression" to fathers does not necessarily entail "a narrow stereotype of male parenthood." It is simply admitting that both men and women have significant parts to play in the "full expression" of positive attributes.

Similar remarks can be made about Harper's third reason. He accuses

feminists like Elizabeth Dodson Gray of reductionist and dichotomous thinking, since they propose "a virtually undifferentiated complex" of "male/female, hierarchical/communal, capitalist/socialist, exploitive/non-exploitive, etc."<sup>5</sup> If Harper assumes that "full expression" must belong to one gender at the expense of the other, then he engages in the same type of thinking. It is both dichotomous and reductionist to think that only one gender is capable of "full expression."

Some feminists have set forth historical reasons to justify their formation of "undifferentiated complexes." Perhaps the original source for this line of reasoning is Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Writing in 1949, de Beauvoir declares:

It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine. ... "The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities," said Aristotle; "we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness." And St. Thomas for his part pronounced woman to be an "imperfect man," an "incidental" being. This is symbolized in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called "a supernumerary bone" of Adam. Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.<sup>6</sup>

In more recent years, Caroline Whitbeck and Marilyn Pearsall have expressed similar views.<sup>7</sup> From the formation of the ancient Chinese philosophy of yin and yang, to the creation of modern Jungian psychology, men have tended to evaluate positively the properties of their own nature. Insofar as women were perceived as being different, they became the opposing (or negative) gender, a "defective" creation, or (in de Beauvoir's terms) the second (other) sex.

Apparently some modern feminists believe in the old adage: "turnabout is fair play." Since "male philosophers" have supposedly engaged in "undifferentiated complexes" that devalue women, some feminists apparently feel justified in reversing the situation. It is not my present purpose to judge whether de Beauvoir or Whitbeck have given a fair treatment of "male philosophy." Instead, it should be sufficient to point out that, from the standpoint of Christian ethics, all such gender devaluation is wrong. This conclusion holds true regardless of who is doing the devaluation: Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Sara Ruddick, or even William Harper. If God created both human genders, blessed them and pronounced them "very good" (Gen. 1:26-31), then it is highly improper to grant "full expression" to one sex at the expense of the other.

## II.

Harper also reasons that we should follow the Biblical example of depicting God exclusively in male terms. Nowhere does Harper explain or define what he means by "the Biblical example." If he intends these words to refer

to the preserved texts of the Old and New Testaments, then his argument rests on a false premise. Although Harper might prove that the Bible depicts God *predominantly* with male attributes, he cannot demonstrate that the Scriptures refer to God *exclusively* in masculine terms. This is true because the Bible sometimes uses feminine imagery to describe features of God's love and wisdom. The Old Testament Psalmist, for example, declares that the believer's hope in God has a calming effect, "like a child quieted at its mother's breast" (Ps. 131:1-2). The Book of Isaiah states that the possibility of God forgetting Israel is like the chances of a mother forgetting her suckling infant (Is. 49:15). The Lord comforts Jerusalem, just like a mother soothes her children (Is. 66:13). In the Book of Proverbs, God's wisdom is personified as a woman who calls in the marketplace to all who will follow her advice (Prov. 1:20-21; 8:1-2). Given such feminine imagery, Harper cannot prove that the Biblical God is manifested exclusively in male terms.

Perhaps Harper intends "Biblical example" to refer to the Scriptural record of Jesus' life and teachings, rather than the preserved texts of the entire Bible. If so, then Harper's article maintains an inadequate view of the New Testament Christ. According to Harper, "Jesus deliberately called God 'Father' and not 'Mother'."<sup>8</sup> I leave aside the complex, epistemological questions of how Harper knows Jesus' language was deliberate, and if so, what intentions were accomplished by such references. Instead, I will simply note that, by the end of his article, Harper uses this allegation as a premise in a longer argument:

Jesus...surely never took part in wrongdoing, and Jesus referred to God exclusively in male terms. It would seem, then, that there is nothing intrinsically wrong in doing so.<sup>9</sup>

This would be a compelling argument were it not for one, minor drawback: Jesus does not refer to God exclusively in male terms.

According to the authors of the New Testament, Jesus referred to himself as God. In fact, the identity between his nature and the divine was so complete that Jesus "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (Phil. 2:6, RSV). On at least one occasion, Jesus also referred to himself in clearly feminine terms (Mt. 23:37; Lu. 13:34). Now, if 'being Jesus' is logically equivalent to 'being God', and if 'being Jesus' entails 'the possession of some feminine attributes,' then it follows that 'being God' also entails 'the possession of some feminine attributes.' While it is true that Jesus calls God his Father, it is equally true that, by identifying himself with deity and by ascribing feminine attributes to his own nature, Jesus thereby assigns some feminine properties to God. Thus, he does not refer to deity in exclusively male terms.

After the New Testament era, there was a persistent (albeit at times, underground) tradition in Christianity which continued to assign feminine properties to the Second Person of the Trinity. A saying attributed alternatively to the Montanist prophets, Priscilla and Quintilla, declared: "Christ came to me in the form of a woman in shining garments and taught me wisdom..."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this tradition reached its zenith in the writings of the Late Medieval mystic and philosopher, Dame Julian of Norwich. She argued

that the Second Person of the Trinity can be properly addressed as Mother, since that term best describes the nurturing love and mercy of Jesus.<sup>11</sup> From Luther onward, Protestants have generally repudiated this tradition, but in light of the modern feminist movement, perhaps it is time for Protestant Christians to re-examine the historical resources within Christianity for assigning feminine properties to God.<sup>12</sup>

### III.

Harper's second and fourth reasons rest on a number of confusions. Among the items which he confuses, are the following:

(1) Ascribing feminine properties to God, versus personifying these attributes as a distinct Goddess. The Bible assigns feminine characteristics to God, but it firmly condemns the worship of Goddesses (Ex. 34:13; Dt. 7:5; Ac. 19:23-41; etc.).

(2) Believing that nature possesses a derived moral value because God originally pronounced it as "good" (Gen. 1:31), versus worshipping the earth as a Goddess who possesses absolute, underived moral worth. Although nature is presently corrupted by human sin (Gen. 2:17; Ro. 8:22), it is not as "indifferent" as Harper maintains. I believe that a moderate position would view nature as possessing a secondary, derived value, as opposed to absolute or little worth. Thus, the basis for an ecological ethics is not simply human self-interest, but also the value which God originally conferred on creation (Ro. 1:20).

(3) Believing that God is (or can be) immanent, versus believing in pantheism. Harper rejects pantheism, but in the process, he also concludes that "the immanence of God in the world would seem to be inconsistent with the Gospel message..."<sup>13</sup> To the contrary, I wonder how Jesus could have preached the Gospel message other than by coming into the world and being immanent (Jn. 1:14).

(4) Perceiving that Goddess worship does not necessarily lead to improved social conditions for women, versus maintaining that worship of an all-male God is somehow beneficial for the feminine gender. Some feminists are well aware of the fact that Goddess worship is often practiced in rigidly patriarchal societies.<sup>14</sup> However, this fact does not abrogate the need for a deity with which women can both relate and identify. I believe that the Biblical God can meet such needs, whereas Harper's all-male (but somehow, at the same time, Totally Transcendent) God cannot.

I conclude that a "loving, supportive, gracious, charitable, forgiving and encouraging" deity would not deprive half of the human race from experiencing significant aspects of the divine nature.<sup>15</sup> The Biblical God, a deity who is revealed in both masculine and feminine terms, does not so deprive women. However, Harper's all-male deity does not allow women to affirm their gender as being created in the image of God. For that and the other reasons discussed above, Harper's position should be rejected by both men and women of Christian convictions.

## NOTES

1. William Harper, "On Calling God 'Mother'," *Faith and Philosophy*, 11 (1994), 290.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
3. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *WomanSpirit Rising* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1992), p. 275.
4. Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 292.
5. Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 294.
6. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), pp. xv-xvi.
7. Caroline Whitbeck, "Theories of Sex Difference," *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. V, Nos. 1-2 (Fall/Winter 1973-74), pp. 54-80. Marilyn Pearsall, ed., *Women and Values* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994), p. 32.
8. Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 294.
9. Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 296.
10. Epiphanius, *Panarion* XLIX. 1. See Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), vol. 1, p. 168.
11. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, (Roger L. Roberts, ed.), Ridgefield, Connecticut: Morehouse Publishers, 1982.
12. For feminist treatments of Luther's views, see Ann Loades, ed., *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 120-148.
13. Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 293.
14. Consult, for example, Serry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in Michelle Zimbalist, et. al., eds., *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 67-87.
15. Harper, *op. cit.*, p. 296.