

The Feminist Movement (5) The Offense of God as Father

Someone wrote, "On the seventh day man created God in his own image. Blasphemous? Yes, but nevertheless true." Theologian Gordon Kaufman views the concept of God as merely a construct of the human imagination. If this is so, nothing prevents us from deciding who God is.

In our time, many are guilty of creating God in their own image. The current debate over whether God is a "He" or a "She" is a case in point. Christianity is criticized for being sexist. Feminist theologians claim that the concept of the Fatherhood of God leads directly to the male oppression of females in society. The *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* suggests that we must avoid referring to God with masculine pronouns. The Journal even says that, one way of avoiding altogether the third person pronouns in reference to God is to mix or alternate the use of the feminine and masculine pronouns referring to Her(Him). Toronto University feminist theologian Joanne Dewart advocates the use of a non-sexist pronoun to replace He and Him when speaking of God. Andrew Greeley, a Roman Catholic priest, professor of sociology, novelist and contributor to popular magazines has the annoying habit of referring to God as S/He. In his autobiography, he writes that his own image of God is that She is a Comedienne. Life is either a comedy or an absurdity and he opts for the former alternative.

Biblical Chauvinism?

Boston feminist theologian Mary Daly went to extremes in her rejection of the Fatherhood of God. She charges that the oppressive situation of women in ancient times is reflected in the Bible. The authors of both the Old and New Testaments were men of their times, and it would be naive to think that they were free of the prejudices of their age. In the history of the Old Testament, women emerge as subjugated and inferior beings. Through the course of time, the anti-feminist tradition of Christian culture has justified itself to a large extent in the story of the origin and activities of the "first mother," (Eve), which until recently was not understood as a myth but rather was taken as straight historical fact. And Daly claims that the most startling anti-feminist passages in the Scriptures are found in the letters of the Apostle Paul. Daly's extremism has led her right out of the Church and straight into paganism. Says Daly, "The Ethos of Judaeo Christian culture is dominated by the Most Unholy Trinity: Rage, Genocide and War." Samuel Bacchiocchi observes, and I believe rightly so, that feminists who advocate changing the personal names of God from Father, King, and Lord to impersonal abstractions as "Womb of Being," "Immanent Mother," "Life Force," "Divine Generatrix," or "Ground Being," are ending up with a God who is a far cry from the biblical and personal God.

A New Religion

The change of the biblical imagery of the Fatherhood of God to God as mother has far-reaching implications. It is not an innocent change, rather it is the replacement of Christianity with a new kind of religion. The deification of the female principle found its expression in the early literary cultures of the ancient Near East. Some of the more famous goddesses are the Mesopotamian Innina-Ishtar, the Syrian Astarte, the Egyptian Isis and Hathor, the Cretan Great Goddess and the Cyprian Aphrodite. Hinduism presents the most developed example of the feminization of the sacred in the contemporary world.

Feminine images of the deity are as numerous, popular, and well developed as the male aspects of deity. They are worshipped and portrayed alone or with their husband consorts. Kali, traditionally a consort of Shiva, is widely worshipped to this day in Bengal, as the supreme mother. Kali is often pictured as having great fangs, with skulls hanging around her neck. Dr. J. H. Bavinck, renowned missiologist commented on the feminization of the sacred. His remarks are worth noting. "Man has the subconscious idea that a mother-goddess makes him feel less guilty. Apparently she is looked upon as a deity that does not take our sin quite as seriously as a father-god would, and understandingly smiles down on it with motherly tenderness. The mother-goddess is often a personification of the all-bearing earth, dark, and at the same time fruitful, from which all life emerges." So, through the influence of liberation ideologies, there is now a great interest in the female imagery of the sacred; an imagery rooted in ancient and modern paganism.

God Revealed

On our own, we cannot know God. God introduces Himself to us in Scripture. We may not make an image of Him, and thus fit Him into our theology. We don't reach for God. He makes Himself known to us. Man's quest for God is always doomed to failure. Unless the God of the Bible is accepted, God will remain unknown. In Scripture, God reveals Himself as the Father God, the Creator and Controller of our lives, and we are subordinate to Him as His children. (James 1:17-18) Both the Old and the New Testaments alike affirm the sovereignty and the Fatherhood of God. God in His care for Israel is frequently compared to that of a father (Hosea 11:1; Deut 14:1; 2 Sam. 7:14). In a narrower sense, God-is the Father of the God-fearing among the nation, rather than of the nation of Israel as a whole (Ps. 103:12; Mal. 3:17).

God is the eternal Father. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus has a personal relationship with His Father (John 5:17). God loves His own Son (John 5:20, 10:17, 17:24, 26). Christ does not only call God His Father, but also His God (Matt. 27:26; John 20:17). God calls Jesus His only Son (Matt. 3:17). Jesus gave a largely increased prominence to the Fatherhood of God. The number of instances of the word "Father" as applied to God in the Gospels is more than double the number found in the remaining books of the New Testament. In the Gospel of John it occurs 107 times. The Father is revealed as sovereign, righteous and merciful. Prayer may confidently be offered to Him through Jesus His Son. What a comfort that we may call ourselves as

Christians the children of our Father God. We have been adopted into His family (Rom. 8:16, 17, 23).

A Feminine Side?

Is there no feminine side to God at all? The Bible does not avoid feminine images of God. God is said to have given birth to Israel (Dent. 32:18; Isa. 42:14, 46:3). Jesus likens God to a loving and saddened mother hen crying over the waywardness of her children (Matt. 23:37-39). In the parable of the lost coin, Jesus compares God to a woman who painstakingly looks through her house for that one coin. In the same way, God searches for His lost children. Isaiah 66:13 gives this beautiful image of God: "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you; and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem." Though the actions of God are sometimes described in feminine terms, the person of God is never described as feminine. God is never referred to as a She. Dr. J.H. Bavinck observed that God has a feminine quality – something that is motherly and tender and caring. One may acknowledge all this and at the same time feel that it is not without reason that God reveals Himself as a Father in heaven, but generally not as mother. Bavinck says that the Bible speaks so little of God as mother, because of the danger of distortion. God warns us that, when we see Him first of all as a mother, we take dangerous risks, as the history of religion shows clearly again and again. The Gospel does not start with the Cross of Christ or the gifts of the Spirit, but with the Father who loved the world so much that He gave His only Son (John 3:16). The Father is the source of everything in both creation and redemption. He is not only the source of everything, but also the goal of everything.

Praise be the Father, Lord, our God of Grace,....
Sovereign in your faithful, covenant embrace.
From this day together, make our love endure,
Ever self-effacing, passionate, and pure.

Johan D. Tangelder
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