Concordia Theological Quarterly

Volume 79:1–2   **January/April 2015**

Table of Contents

God Our Mother?
Biblical and Philosophical Considerations
in Feminist God Language

Mark P. Surburg

At the Sandy Hook interfaith prayer vigil, a Lutheran pastor prayed: "Lord God we call you by many names: Elohim Adonai, Great Spirit, Higher Power, Divine One. But however we address you, you are always Father and Mother to us all."[1] Naturally, this event received a great deal of attention because of issues it raised related to American civic religion and religious syncretism. What should also attract our attention is the manner in which this prayer summarizes all that has been said previously about God/the Divine Power in the words, "you are always Father and Mother to us all." The prayer makes clear that whatever we may say about God, God is both Father and Mother. The statement is remarkable, because in the present setting of our culture it is so *unremarkable*. It illustrates how language like this has become commonplace among many who claim to bear the name Christian.

Although Jesus Christ taught his followers to address God as "Father" in the Lord's Prayer, during the last forty years, feminism has vigorously raised the charge that this term can no longer effectively serve Christians as the exclusive reference to the first person of the Trinity. Instead, it has maintained that feminine names and terms of reference also need to be used. In particular, "Mother" has become a frequent term used in place of or alongside "Father."

I. The Feminist Challenge

In the early 1970s, Mary Daly made the accusation that has served as the radical leading edge of the feminist movement: "If God is male, then male is God."[2] In this rather sensational statement she raised the charge

---

[1] The pastor is not part of the fellowship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Prayer transcribed from "Connecticut Elementary School Shooting: Memorial Service," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ow1OlcDzCE.

[2] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*: *Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 21; Daly goes on to speak of the need for "castrating God."

Mark P. Surburg is Pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Marion, Illinois.

that if God is thought of as male and described in masculine language, then on earth the male ends up dominating women.

Orthodox Christianity easily parried this charge, since it has never said that God is male.[3] For example, Gregory of Nyssa wrote, "The distinction of male and female does not exist in the Divine and blessed nature."[4] However, Daly's statement has set the general direction for more reformist feminists.[5] These writers have questioned whether in the current social context Christian trinitarian theology can continue to use "Father" and "Son."[6]

Reformist feminists raise two objections to the use of "Father." First, they argue that the Scriptures are the product of a patriarchal and male-dominated society. Second, they have maintained that since language about God is metaphorical, other metaphors for God are both possible and preferable.

In the first objection, patriarchy is defined as "a system of social relations in which the male is normative and in which the male-female relationship is one of domination and subordination."[7] The language for God (and two-thirds of trinitarian language) is masculine because men in a male dominated society wrote the Bible.[8] It thus reflects more about an

---

[3] In this article "orthodox" will refer to creedal Christianity in the sense of "right teaching" rather than the Eastern branch of Christianity.

[4] Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2nd ser., 14 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 5:412. While this is true, we must be aware that on the more popular level those wishing to be orthodox *have* made such statements.

[5] According to Sallie McFague feminism falls into two camps: revolutionary and reformist. Revolutionary feminists have no desire to remain within Christianity. Reformists wish to reshape the tradition and make it more amenable to women and their experiences. Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 152.

[6] For an extended examination of feminist objections, see Hannah Bacon, *What's Right with the Trinity?: Conversations in Feminist Theology* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 15–52.

[7] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "The Baptismal Formula, Feminist Objections, and Trinitarian Theology," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26, no. 2 (1989): 236.

[8] "The Bible is not just interpreted from a male perspective, as some feminists argued. Rather, it is manmade because it is written by men and is the expression of a patriarchal culture." Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), 13. It is interesting to note that when feminists locate the problem in biblical culture, they also feel constrained to add caveats so as not to appear anti-Semitic. As Fiorenza judges, "To rediscover 'Jesus, the feminist,' over and against these

ancient culture than about God. Modern thought, as the argument goes, has moved beyond this and now realizes that such language hinders women in their religious experience.[9]

Orthodox writers have delivered a vigorous critique of this position on two fronts. In the first place they have observed that it is a non sequitur to link masculine God language as the obvious outgrowth of patriarchal culture.[10] "Patriarchal" cultures do not *necessarily* use a massive preponderance of masculine language when talking about the Deity. In fact, most decidedly "patriarchal" cultures had numerous feminine references and deities.[11]

Jewish roots of the early Christian movement can only lead to a further deepening of anti-Judaism . . . . The praxis and vision of Jesus and his movement is best understood as an inner-Jewish renewal movement that presented an *alternative* option to the dominant patriarchal structure rather than an oppositional formation rejecting the values and praxis of Judaism" (107; emphasis original).

[9] Proctor-Smith advocates a move toward "emancipatory language": "Nonsexist language seeks to avoid gender-specific terms. Inclusive language seeks to balance gender references. Emancipatory language seeks to transform language use and to challenge stereotypical gender references"; cited in Susan Brooks Thistlewaite, "On the Trinity," *Interpretation* 45, no. 2 (1991): 168.

[10] Mollenkott illustrates such an approach when she writes, "My own sense is that it is perfectly natural for the Bible to contain a vast predominance of masculine God-language, springing as it does from a deeply patriarchal culture." Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 110.

[11] Kimel points out that "the divine masculinity of the Judaeo-Christian God must not be rejected as patriarchal projection. Israel was perhaps the one culture during biblical times that did not incorporate the feminine principle into the deity. The Sumerians, the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans—all had pantheons of male and female deities, yet each were at least as patriarchal and sexist as Israel. Patriarchy is no bar to interpreting deity in feminine terms." Alvin F. Kimel, "The Holy Trinity Meets Ashtoreth: A Critique of the Episcopal 'Inclusive' Liturgies," *Anglican Theological Review* 71, no. 1 (1989): 40. The Mother goddess was a significant feature of paganism in the Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds. John Ferguson comments: "The Mother's names were innumerable. In Sumer she was Inanna, among the Akkadians Ishtar, in Ugarit Anat, in Syria Atargatis. At Ephesus she was Artemis-Diana, in Priene Baubo, in Cyprus Aprhodite, in Crete Rhea or Dictynna, at Eleusis Demeter, in Sparta Orthia, in Thrace Bendis, in Egypt Isis or Hathor, at Pessinus Cybele." John Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 16; see his discussion of the Great Mother, 13–31. In 205 BC, the Romans determined that the Phrygian Cybele should be brought to Rome and become a Roman god. The festival for Cybele, the Megalensia, became part of the official religious calendar that was observed in all Roman colonies throughout the empire. See Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, trans. Antonia Nevill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 28–74.

This leads to a second and even more insightful observation about the Scriptures' theological perspective and "God language." Rather than being typical in the absence of feminine God language, the Bible is in fact *atypical*. As noted feminist Elaine Pagels observes: "Indeed, the absence of feminine symbolism of God marks Judaism, Christianity and Islam in striking contrast to the world's other religious traditions, whether in Egypt, Babylonia, Greece and Rome or Africa, Polynesia, India and North America."[12] The biblical writers did not unknowingly avoid feminine language due to their "patriarchalism." Their references to God as Father "were not culturally imposed but were made in awareness of the alternatives, an awareness fuller and more immediate than our own."[13] These writers acted out of a fundamentally theological presupposition.

The biblical writers sought to avoid a theology that identified the Creator with the creation "and that identification almost automatically comes about when feminine language for God is used."[14] Fallen man continues to want to "be like God" (Gen 3:5) and seeks to avoid a transcendent Creator located over him. Cultures have repeatedly sought to bridge this gap by identifying God with the world. They have used feminine language for God, precisely because when God "is portrayed in feminine language, the figures of carrying in the womb, of giving birth, and of suckling immediately come into play."[15]

God and the world become linked through birth, and creation becomes an outgrowth of God. As mythology expert Joseph Campbell observes: "When you have a Goddess as the creator, it's her own body that is the universe. She is identical with the universe."[16] This tendency is readily

---

[12] Elaine H. Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1979), 107.

[13] Roland M. Frye, "Language for God and Feminist Language: Problems and Principles," in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 22.

[14] Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods': A Discussion of Female Language for God," in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 12. This piece is a later revised version of Achtemeier's "Female Language for God: Should the Church Adopt It?" in *The Hermeneutical Quest: Essays in Honor of James Luther Mays on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Donald G. Miller (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications), 97–114.

[15] Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods'," 9.

[16] Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 167.

seen in the modern appellation "Mother Earth" that is often associated with environmental concerns such as Earth Day. We are told, "Love your Mother."

Biblical theology will have no part of this since "Yahweh is transcendent Creator, the absolute other, differentiated completely from his creation. He is neither the universe nor the self but the Lord and ruler of both."[17] The masculine biblical language operates on a de-sexualized model. It focuses on the God who gives (just as the male in the procreative act),[18] while avoiding the feminine language that leads to a fusing of Creator and creation.[19] The presence of male *and* absence of female language leaves the emphasis on God as creator, while eliminating the "biological father God" of paganism and making "non-idolatrous, metaphorical 'father language' about God possible."[20] Because it removes sexuality from the equation (God has no consort or feminine other), it both avoids fallen man's desire to fuse Creator and creation *and* confesses that God alone creates outside of himself. This fact has important theological implications: "Because God is not identical with the things which he has made, he is free to love the world by virtue of his own good will. That God creates the world is, therefore, the basis for what the Scriptures call 'grace' and 'love,' the sheer goodness which will to give favor and life apart from any 'merit or worthiness' in the recipient."[21]

Reformist feminism's second objection revolves around language and its ability to communicate a transcendent Deity. This approach focuses on

[17] Kimel, "The Holy Trinity Meets Ashtoreth," 41.

[18] James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 180–181.

[19] Achtemeier notes, "But we can never rightly understand ourselves and our place in the universe, the Bible tells us, until we realize that we are not gods and goddesses. Rather we are creatures, wondrously and lovingly made by a sovereign Creator: 'It is he who made us, and not we ourselves' (Ps 100:3). The Bible will use no language which undermines that confession. It therefore eschews all feminine language for God that might open the door to such error, and it is rigorous in its opposition to every other religion and cultic practice that identifies creation and creator." Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods'," 9.

[20] Janet Martin Soskice, "Can a Feminist Call God 'Father'?" in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 89.

[21] *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1998), 22–23. This report is a very helpful resource in considering these issues. The name of the commission is often abbreviated CTCR.

the incomprehensibility and inadequacy of human language in talking about God. Soskice summarizes this argument: "In any religion where God is conceived of as radically transcendent, it is arguable that all the language used of God will be metaphorical or at least figurative. This means that a change in preferred metaphor or notation is always a theoretical possibility."[22]

Feminists argue that since all language about God is metaphorical, it is all equally adequate *and* equally inadequate. We can therefore alter the metaphors used, they argue, as the need arises. In this reformist understanding, "Father," "Son," and even "Spirit" are metaphors that have been used in the past. However, they are *only* metaphors with their own unique baggage. As metaphors they can just as easily be replaced by other metaphors for the trinitarian God that are not products of patriarchalism and that function better in modern society, such as Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier; God, Word, Spirit; Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit; Parent, Child, Transformer; and Abba, Servant, Paraclete.[23]

II. Philosophical Discussions about Metaphor and God Language: McFague and Soskice

The discussion in this objection has focused upon the nature of metaphor and how it functions. During the last three decades, Sallie McFague and Janet Martin Soskice have been two of the leading figures in the debate about metaphor and feminist religious God language. McFague's work presents one of the most highly developed accounts of metaphor from the perspective of reformist feminism and displays the features that are common in this approach. Soskice, on the other hand, has developed the most thoroughgoing philosophical case for critical theological realism, which maintains the intellectual legitimacy of orthodox Christian language about God. A brief examination of their work will demonstrate the important contours of this debate.

The point of entry for this discussion is the relationship between models and metaphors. McFague conflates the two when she describes a

---

[22] Soskice, "Can a Feminist Call God 'Father'?" 82.

[23] Wainwright observes: "It is a common move in feminist theology to invoke the category of metaphor and then, on the too easy assumption that 'all our language about God is metaphorical,' go on to say that 'Father' may be replaced or complemented by 'Mother,' 'Friend,' and so on." Geoffrey Wainwright, "The Doctrine of the Trinity: Where the Church Stands or Falls," *Interpretation* 45, no. 2 (1991): 119.

model "as a dominant metaphor, a metaphor with staying power."[24] Soskice correctly rejects such conflation.[25] She defines metaphor as "that figure of speech whereby *we speak* of one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another."[26] On the other hand, a model is when "an object or state of affairs . . . *is viewed* in terms of some object or state of affairs."[27] Therefore, though closely related, the two differ in that metaphor is a *linguistic* phenomenon.[28]

In considering how metaphor operates, McFague and Soskice begin with I.A. Richard's statement that "when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is the resultant of their interaction."[29] However, from here the two go in different directions. McFague adopts Max Black's grid/screen understanding of metaphor.[30] More significantly, McFague argues that "the heart of metaphorical reference, as Ricoeur insists, is summarized in the aphorism 'is and is not.'"[31] McFague takes the is/is not in a comparative sense, so that "God is mother" means "God is/is

---

[24] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 23. For her, models differ from metaphors in that "some metaphors gain wide appeal and become major ways of structuring and ordering experience" (23). In McFague's work they differ only in extent of use and breadth of application.

[25] She notes, "It seems the universal practice in the theological literature to use the terms 'model' and 'metaphor' synonymously." Janice Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 55.

[26] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 5; emphasis added.

[27] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 55; emphasis added.

[28] Soskice concludes that "metaphors arise when we speak on the basis of models" (*Metaphor and Religious Language*, 101) and "talk based on models will be metaphorical" (55). The close relation between the two continues in that the linguistic presentation of models usually occurs via metaphor (102).

[29] I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford, 1936), 93. The reference is cited by McFague (*Metaphorical Theology,* 37) and Soskice (*Metaphor and Religious Language*, 39).

[30] Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962). In this view, metaphor provides a "grid," "screen," or "filter" that organizes thought about less familiar subjects by seeing them in terms of familiar ones (McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 23). Like others, Soskice criticizes several aspects of this view related to "filtering." Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 41–42.

[31] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 134. The "is and is not" of metaphor is a recurring theme in McFague, exemplified in her statement, "Metaphorical theology, most basically, insists on the dialectic of the positive and the negative, on the 'is and is not,' and that tension permeates every aspect of it." McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 134.

not mother," or "God as mother."[32] In her view, the is/is not also means that models and metaphors are *both* true and untrue.[33] For this reason "they invite existential commitment . . . in a qualified manner."[34]

The position taken by McFague proves illuminating since it provides an example of the view that there is "double meaning" (literal and metaphorical) and "double truth" (a false literal meaning and a true metaphorical one) in metaphor. Soskice offers a devastating critique as she notes that most metaphors do not have two meanings. Instead, "the alternative to understanding them as metaphors is not to understand them literally but to fail to make sense of them at all." McFague's position derives from failing to distinguish "between what the speaker says (the words and sentences he or she uses) and what the speaker intends by uttering them within a particular context."[35] Likewise, metaphors are not inherently *both* true and false. Only by taking the complete utterance in its context can we assess it and determine its accuracy. As Soskice writes, "Once we understand the claim to be metaphorical, we can make a judgment as to its accuracy."[36]

In McFague's position, the is/is not of metaphor means that metaphorical statements are always indirect. McFague adds an *additional* factor when she employs Ricoeur's term "redescription" and asserts that reality is redescribed through metaphors.[37] She writes, "The reference is, however, not only indirect but redescriptive; that is, metaphorical construction refers to reality both in the sense of *creation* as well as discovery."[38] Thus for McFague, metaphors both refer indirectly to reality and also redescribe or create in order to do so. However, Soskice has underscored the inherent flaw in the concept of "redescription." She observes: "This point deserves emphasis—redescription, however radical, is always *re*-description. The

---

[32] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 23.

[33] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 92.

[34] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 134.

[35] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 85.

[36] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 86. This has important consequences, since it means that "the truth or falsity of the metaphorical claim can be assessed only at the level of intended meaning" (86).

[37] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 39–40, 132, 136.

[38] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 13; emphasis added.

interesting thing about metaphor, or at least about some metaphors, is that they are used not to redescribe but to disclose for the first time."[39]

Soskice rejects a comparative approach to metaphor because this cannot explain how metaphor is able to say something new. Her own inter-animation theory of metaphor draws upon I.A. Richard's "tenor" (the metaphor's underlying subject) and "vehicle" (the mode of expression).[40] Both tenor and vehicle carry with them a network of associations that interact with one another in depicting the one true subject of the metaphor.[41] This unity of subject matter and plurality of associative networks operate together in a given context as the reference is "effected by the speaker's employment of the whole utterance in its context."[42]

McFague and Soskice present very different views of how metaphor works, and these differences bear important implications for God talk. Both sides recognize that metaphor is "indirect," in that reference can only occur through metaphor. Yet for McFague, the adjective "metaphorical" primarily connotes uncertainty. This must be so since not only does it work indirectly, but as "redescription" it also employs *creation* of versions of reality.[43]

By contrast, Soskice's position sets forth a far more capable tool that offers the real possibility of meaningfully speaking about God. Since Soskice operates within the bounds of traditional Christianity, she sees the need for a robust critical realism. She openly grants that "a form of critical realism is advocated, not because it is the only cogent position, but because so much of the Christian tradition has been undeniably realist in sensibility."[44] One cannot ignore the fact that Christians have taken their models to be explanatory and reality depicting.[45] Because Soskice works within a

---

[39] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 89.

[40] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language,* 39. Or to put it another way, the vehicle is the thing to which the term normally applies, while the tenor is the thing to which it refers in the metaphor's use. See G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 152. For example, as Paul Raabe explains, "In the metaphor 'drinking the cup of Yahweh's wrath' the tenor or subject is one's experience of divine wrath, and the vehicle or symbol is drinking a cup of wine." Paul R. Raabe, *Obadiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 207.

[41] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 47.

[42] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 53.

[43] McFague, *Models of God*, 26.

[44] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 137.

[45] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 112. In fact, she concludes, "One might even say that Christianity stands or falls on its conviction that its claims concern that

framework that presupposes a transcendent God, she realizes that human descriptions and references to God will face limitations, yet she argues that such language is depicting reality.[46]

III. Biblical Language about God

In responding to the feminist position, orthodox writers have first of all pointed out that one cannot accurately say that *all* language about God is metaphorical. The statement, "God is Creator," is literal in that "the conceptual signified evoked by *Creator* is fully congruent with the characteristics of God as maker of all things."[47]

That being said, orthodox writers have also noted that all metaphors, which serve as the method employed for most "God talk," are not equal. One cannot say that the statements "God is our Father" and "God is rot" (רָקָב; Hos 5:12) are equally true of God. They differ in that the vehicle "father" has a much higher degree of correspondence to the tenor than the vehicle "rot."[48] Many more characteristics of "father" correspond to God than characteristics of "rot".

All metaphors then are equal (in that they are metaphors), but some metaphors are more equal than others—they are "more literal" than others since a higher number of components of meaning correspond between vehicle and tenor. As Voelz observes: "Some also have such a greater degree of correspondence that they begin to distance themselves from metaphors and become, as it were, a *tertium quid*, a third option, a 'virtual literal'

---

which really is the case with God and humanity." Janet Martin Soskice, "Knowledge and Experience in Science and Religion: Can We Be Realists?" in *Physics, Philosophy And Theology: A Common Quest For Understanding*, ed. Robert J. Russel, William R. Stoeger, and George V. Coyne (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 1988), 174. Compare this with the statement by McFague: "Like theology as construction, theology as heuristics supports the assertion that our concept of God is precisely that—*our concept* of God—and not God." McFague, *Models of God*, 37; emphasis original.

[46] Soskice's defense of critical realism rests upon a crucial distinction between referring to God and defining him. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 140. She writes, "Our concern is with the conceptual possibility rather than proof, and with a demonstration that we may justly claim to speak of God without claiming to define him, and to do so by means of metaphor" (148).

[47] Voelz, *What Does This Mean?* 177–178; emphasis original.

[48] Voelz, *What Does This Mean?* 178. See Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 153–154, for a further discussion of "degree of correspondence."

usage. If we may 'adjust' Thomas Aquinas' terminology a bit . . . we may call them '**virtually literal analogies**.'"[49]

Certain of these metaphors become controlling metaphors because of their frequency and fundamental character in understanding God and his relation to man.[50] With good reason, Achtemeier maintains that "the God of the Bible has revealed himself in five principal metaphors as King, Father, Judge, Husband, and Master, and finally, decisively, as God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."[51] The CTCR document, *Biblical Language and Inclusive Language*, goes on to comment about Achtemeier's work, "We might add the metaphor of the Shepherd, but our focus here is on the nature, not the number of these principal metaphors. The metaphors are each masculine and are indicated to be such by the corresponding pronouns and verbs used with them."[52]

Nowhere in the entire Bible is God addressed as "mother" or directly referred to using the noun "mother."[53] In fact, "*[i]n neither the Old Testament nor in the New Testament is God ever referred to by a feminine pronoun.* This is important, for the character of a pronoun is to point to its referent. A pronoun specifies and identifies."[54]

There is a very small group of passages that use feminine and/or maternal imagery to describe God and his actions.[55] It is critical to recognize that almost all of these are in the form of a simile (or if not in the explicit form with "like" or "as," they are the functional equivalent).[56] A simile provides a more limited figure of speech since it draws "a self-limiting comparison."[57] As Achtemeier explains, "A simile compares one aspect of something to another. For example, in Isa 42:14, God will 'cry out

---

[49] Voelz, *What Does This Mean?* 179; emphasis original.

[50] Voelz, *What Does This Mean?* 180.

[51] Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods'," 5.

[52] *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language*, 13.

[53] *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language*, 21; Frye, "Language for God and Feminist Language," 29.

[54] *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language*, 11; emphasis original.

[55] Generally agreed upon are Deut 32:12; Isa 42:13–14; 45:10; 49:14–15; 66:13; see also feminine bird imagery: Deut 32:11–12; Isa 31:5; Matt 23:37; Luke 13:39.

[56] See the very helpful exegetical discussion of the five main texts (Deut 32:12; Isa 42:13–14; 45:10; 49:14–15; 66:13) in *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language*, 18–21.

[57] Frye, "Language for God and Feminist Language," 39. *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language* notes, "It is the function of simile to compare two or more different things *according to a limited, yet shared characteristic*" (19; emphasis added).

like a women in travail,' but only his *crying out* is being referred to; he is not being identified as a whole with the figure of a woman in childbirth."[58] Both in quantity and form, the biblical language about God cannot be used to justify feminist God language.

IV. Defense of Biblical Trinitarian Language

As so often in the church's history, a challenge on one point of doctrine has led to a deeper reflection on the content revealed in Scripture. Pressed by the challenge of feminism, Christian thinkers have given more thought to the trinitarian expression of God's name as classically expressed in Scripture and liturgy. This consideration has produced four significant objections to any attempt to change the way the church refers to the three persons of the Trinity.

First, the church cannot move beyond the received trinitarian language because it has been bestowed by the language of revelation. For this reason she has neither the right nor the ability to make changes in favor of more "culturally acceptable" terms. Kimel observes:

> By the direction of the Spirit, God chooses the names and metaphors by which he will be known and addressed. They are authoritatively communicated in the Holy Scriptures and enjoy a normative, para-digmatic status in the life of the Christian church . . . . The revelatory efficacy of these images depends not on their natural, iconic character, but on the fact that God has clothed himself in them.[59]

Just as the church cannot move beyond the revelation of God through the incarnation of the Son in this world, so also she cannot move beyond the revelation of God through the language of this world that he has chosen. The CTCR summarizes this well in its report:

> Israel did not choose on its own to speak of God in the way of the Bible. Rather, God has revealed himself in the specific and particular events and words of the Scriptures. If the church is to speak meaningfully of a God who speaks and acts, and who in those words and deeds reveals himself, it is crucial that the church resist the temptation to think of the language of the Bible as merely an expression of cultural bias. The church must affirm that the language of the Bible is precisely the language by which, and alone by which, God wishes to be known and is known. The language of the Scriptures, therefore, is

---

[58] Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods'," 5; emphasis original.

[59] Kimel, "The Holy Trinity Meets Ashtoreth," 33.

the foundational and determinative language which the church is to use to speak about God and the things of God.[60]

Second, the church is unable to move beyond the basic fact that she addresses God as Father because Jesus taught and authorized her to do so. Jenson has argued that Jesus' command permanently weds the church to "Father" and "Son." In his opinion, "Since the church's address of God is authorized only as a repetition of Jesus' address, this fact about him is determinative for the church."[61] He maintains that "the deepest origin and continuing reason for the Christian address of God as 'Father' and the 'Father/Son' pairing within the triune name is the instruction Jesus gave his disciples when they asked their master how to pray."[62]

Third, the church is unable to move beyond "Father" and "Son" because this is how *they addressed one another*. Raabe notes:

> As recorded in the gospels, this is how God spoke to Jesus—"You are my beloved Son"—and this is how Jesus spoke to God—"My Father." It is not a question of whether we like this language or not, whether this language furthers our goals or not. This is how God and Jesus addressed each other. It is an historical given that exists outside of us and our ability to spin or re-conceive or re-imagine. God is the Father of his Son. The Son is the Son of God his Father. This is the way they are related, whether people like it or not.[63]

Fourth, in our knowledge of God's trinitarian character we have received an insight into the inner-trinitarian life of God. Man cannot arrive on his own at the terms used in this regard—*only God can reveal them*. As DiNoia correctly judges:

> These names do not originate in our experience of God and his agency in the world, as do many of the essential names we use to speak of God. We have no basis for naming the persons of the Trinity by their proper names except by their own "usage." . . . These names are proper because they identify nonagential relations internal to the Trinity itself. The exclu-

---

[60] *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language*, 7.

[61] Robert. W. Jenson, "'The Father, He . . .,'" in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 104.

[62] Jenson, "'The Father, He . . .,'" 103.

[63] Paul R. Raabe, "On Feminized God-Language," *CTQ* 74 (2010): 126.

sive warrant of their aptness lies in Christ's revelation of the inner-trinitarian life.[64]

The inner-trinitarian aspect revealed by God in the terms "Father" and "Son" should keep us from trying to find other terms.[65] The truth of this is demonstrated by the kinds of substitutes that have been suggested. For example, the popular "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier" confuses the inner-trinitarian relationships with the Trinity's external acts toward creation (*opera ad extra*) and divides the external action of the Trinity.[66]

---

[64] J.A. DiNoia, "Knowing and Naming the Triune God: The Grammar of Trinitarian Confession," in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 184. The CTCR document notes: "God's fatherhood and God's sonship, however, are rooted ultimately not in his election of Israel but in his divine being. 'Father' and 'Son,' therefore, designate the first and second persons of the Trinity in relation to one another. In God fatherhood is not extrinsic to the being of God. In him 'Father' is not a title; it designates and specifies God's personal/hypostatic reality as Father who eternally begets his Son. Similarly, in God sonship is not extrinsic to his being. In him 'Son' is not a title; it designates and specifies his personal/hypostatic reality as Son who is eternally begotten of the Father." *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language,* 16.

[65] LaCugna is partially correct when she observes: "Prior to the fourth century, in the New Testament, in early Christian theology, and in early Christian creeds, 'Father' had been synonymous with 'Godhead' and did not carry any 'intra-trinitarian' meaning." LaCugna, "The Baptismal Formula, Feminist Objections, and Trinitarian Theology," 241. However, biblical usage *does* contain statements that, if not overtly, then latently, bear witness to intra-trinitarian relations (cf. John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7–15). One cannot dismiss "Father" and "Son" as expressions of intra-trinitarian meaning because the Church did not immediately perceive their significance. The incarnation forced a shift from absolute monotheism (cf. Deut 6:4) to monotheism understood in a trinitarian fashion. This insight and shift could not happen overnight, and only deeper reflection on issues such as Christology and Pneumatology could move the church to perceive the full import of passages such as those in John. The fact that earlier theologians did not yet perceive it does not invalidate later reflection based on biblical evidence. We cannot make pre-Nicene theology absolutely normative unless we expect the church to cease the theological task after the third century. Kimel offers a similar sentiment when he observes: "But as the Church comes to understand and appropriate the full divinity of both the Son and Spirit, such manner of speaking is increasingly misleading. 'God' ceases to function theologically as a proper name and instead becomes a common term predicated of the three persons of the Trinity. 'When I said God,' Gregory of Nazianzen explained, 'I mean Father, Son and Holy Spirit.' Simply to return to the earlier tradition is to repudiate the dogmatic insight of the Nicene Creed into the triune nature of the deity." Kimel, "Trinity Meets Ashtoreth," 36.

[66] "The problem with this replacement is twofold. First, it designates the Trinity's external works toward creation, *opera ad extra*, but the revealed Trinitarian terms designate the persons' relationships to each other within the Trinity, the Father of the Son and

V. The Feminist Contradiction

When considering feminist God language, it is necessary to recognize that the theological structure of Scripture (the understanding about God it provides) simply will not permit many alternative feminine formulations that have been suggested. Feminists exhibit contextual naiveté when they posit that all metaphors are equal, and that we are therefore free to change "Father" and "Son" if we so choose. Contextual conditions place limitations on the range of options available. In the particular instance examined above, we noted that when mankind uses feminine language for God, the distinction between Creator and creation breaks down. However, Scripture contains a theology with a strong Creator/creation distinction, and therefore feminine language for God is not an option. The only way to get around this is to posit a different god that matches the language. This is precisely the goal of those who advocate feminist God language.

An analysis of the feminist challenge to the received language for the Trinity reveals that feminists operate with an agenda that includes two mutually contradictory principles. On the one hand they want to avoid a transcendent, Creator God who is distinct from creation. As McFague argues, "At the heart of patriarchalism as root-metaphor is a subject-object split in which man is envisioned over against God and vice versa."[67] In the view of feminist theology, this transcendence of God leads to the subjection of women and humanity in general.[68]

---

the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. Second, the replacement divides the external action of the Trinity, the *opera ad extra*. In contrast, the Trinity is undivided and therefore the Trinity's actions toward the outside are non-divisible (*opera ad extra non divisa sunt*)." Raabe, "Feminized God-Language," 128.

[67] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 148. McFague later laments that "the gains made in the middle ages towards the flexibility in metaphors for the divine-human relationship—gains towards female, natural, non-gender-related images—were to die out with the Reformation's turn from contemplative, immanental piety to an emphasis on the transcendence of God" (176).

[68] Rosemary Reuther complains, "Patriarchal theology uses the parent image for God to prolong the spiritual infantilism as virtue and to make autonomy and assertion of free will a sin." Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 69. McFague offers a similar sentiment when she judges that "if the traditional model of God's saving activity [a transcendent God who comes to rescue] contributes to a view of human life as infantile, individualistic, and isolated, then it is deeply in need of substantial revision, for human life cannot responsibly be seen in those terms." McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 185. Achtemeier concludes, "But Reuther, like all of the feminist writers, does not want her deity to rule over her: as I said at the beginning, feminists want to get rid of a hierarchical view in which God is their Lord." Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods'," 12.

The biblical God confessed in creedal Christianity *is*, however, the transcendent, Creator God (First Article of the Creed) who remains distinct from his creation. Leonard Klein has observed quite correctly that in the feminist discussion, "The *skandalon* is not maleness. It is the otherness of God, and it is that upon which Christianity must absolutely insist."[69] The remarkable claim of Christianity is that in the incarnation the transcendent God *enters* this world in order to save humanity (John 1:14) and creation itself (Rom 8:18–23).[70]

At the same time feminists want an utterly transcendent God/Deity (separated from humanity) who can then be defined *on their own terms*. Jenson comments: "A God close up is likely to afflict us with his own particular reality, but we do like to peek at divinity from a safe metaphysical distance. From sufficient remove, we need have only 'glimpses' that we can connect according to our needs."[71] Feminists want an impermeable metaphysical barrier between God and creation so that they can define God as the sort of God *they* desire: "Unwilling to accept God's historic self-definition, it embarks on another quest to invent a deity more amenable to it concerns." However in doing this "the God it ends up with is merely the mirror image of itself."[72]

This particular principle proves to be the most troubling for the practice of trinitarian theology. If we are completely cut off from God and our only real knowledge of him is a constantly changing kaleidoscope of metaphors and images (that *we* can freely change), then we can never have any real knowledge about the triune God. Christianity becomes cut off from any knowledge about the immanent Trinity and the intra-trinitarian life. Ultimately, trinitarian theology ceases to exist.

The feminist issue has highlighted the historical role that feminine language about God has played. The Scriptures avoid feminine language that would serve to fuse Creator and creation, and only at the risk of losing a transcendent Creator God who is willing to condescend and save man

---

[69] Leonard Klein, "The God Is to Be Spoken of as 'He'," *Lutheran Forum* 22 (Pentecost 1988): 27.

[70] See the discussion in Mark P. Surburg, "Good Stuff!: The Material Creation and the Christian Faith," *Concordia Journal* 36, no. 3 (2010): 245–262.

[71] Jenson, "'The Father, He . . .,'" 97.

[72] Kimel, "The Holy Trinity Meets Ashtoreth," 46. Raabe describes how an assumption of feminist God language is that human beings can relate to God as a peer. Raabe, "On Feminized God-Language," 130–132.

through the incarnation can Christianity inject significant amounts of feminine language. The history of human cultures has shown where this leads.

The feminist challenge to "Father" and trinitarian language in general does not simply revolve around different terms for the Trinity. Rather it arrives as the product of presuppositions that are hostile to biblical and creedal Christianity.[73] Reformist feminists and Christians who wish to speak in ways that are amenable to our culture may want to stay within Christianity, but their presuppositions logically lead to the positions held by radical feminists such as Daly and Reuther.[74] Feminist God language creates its own god in place of the God who has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

---

[73] Jenson concludes, "The current attack upon the received linguistic structure of Christianity is not an inner-Christian dispute; it is occasioned by the invasion of an antagonistic religious discourse and represents a true crisis of the faith that cannot be dealt with by compromise." Robert Jenson, "'The Father, He . . .'" 96.

[74] In her *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Reuther speaks of God/ess (70). Achtemeier judges that, "distinctive Christian experiences and beliefs are expressed through distinctive language about God, and the changes in that language proposed by femininst theologians do not merely add a few unfamiliar words for God, as some would like to think, but in fact introduce beliefs about God that differ radically from those inherent in Christian faith, understanding, and Scripture." Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods'," 17.