

INTRODUCING

FEMINIST THEOLOGY

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Chapter 3

Feminist Perspectives on God

Christian theology has always recognized, theoretically, that all language for God is analogical or metaphorical, not literal. . . . To take one image drawn from one gender and in one sociological context as normative for God is to legitimate this gender and social group as the normative possessors of the image of God and the representatives of God on earth. This is idolatry.

—ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER¹

The purpose of this chapter is to explore an important question: What are the most appropriate ways for contemporary Christians to speak about God, the ultimate reality whom Christians worship as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier/sustainer? In any religion, God imagery provides the central and integrating symbols of what believers consider to be the highest good, the greatest beauty, and the most authentic truth. In Christianity, and in the other monotheistic religions as well, the image of a male transcendent ruler who has absolute dominion over the world predominates. Christian feminist theologians find much wanting in this image, especially because Christians today tend to take male symbols for God literally. Christian feminists argue that this is not good for women, not good for men, and not true to the rich and varied Christian symbolism for God.

We begin this exploration into Christian feminist perspectives on God with the above quotation from Rosemary Radford Ruether, because she is one of the most widely known feminist theologians, not only in North America but also around the globe, to contribute to Christian feminist theology that focuses on God. In *Sexism and God-Talk*, Ruether astutely observes that “few topics are as likely to arouse such [powerful] feelings in contemporary Christianity as the question of the exclusively male image for God.”²

Like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whose work on the Bible we examined in the previous chapter, hermeneutics features strongly in Ruether’s writings. She applies hermeneutics, in the broad sense of human interpretation and understanding of anything, especially of women’s experiences and of Christian texts. In a more specific sense, Ruether’s theology is characterized by the application of a hermeneutics of suspicion, especially where traditional Christian texts conflict with her own life experience. In reflecting on her experience and its effect on her personal sense of God, Ruether observes that it is the “heritage of mothers and daughters” and not “the official patriarchal heritage” that contributed to why she thinks of God “not as the paternal superego, but as the empowering matrix.”³

Speaking of God as an “empowering matrix” may strike the reader as unusual. Ordinarily, Christians readily speak of God in more personal terms and not in abstract language. Ruether chooses the word “matrix” deliberately, however, to make a point that she believes is important. God cannot be equated with what a particular personal and therefore gendered name for God represents. She believes that God is best described as a matrix, because she envisions God to be “beneath and around us as an encompassing source of life and renewal.”⁴

Early on, Ruether, like many second-wave feminist theologians, became attentive to how the masculinization of God in the Christian tradition rationalized the dehumanization of women and justified patriarchy within and outside of Christian churches. She writes, “In each case the existing social hierarchy and system of power are justified by defining them as the order of creation and the will of God.”⁵ Questions about God’s will in particular circumstances cannot be separated from who God is, and very importantly, who (or what) persons imagine God to be. This is so because there are many meanings and images associated with the word “God” in the Christian tradition.

Over the centuries God has been experienced and understood in different ways by different people in various times and places. Although Christianity recognizes that God is “beyond” gender, the language used with reference to God has been predominantly masculine. For many, a question arises: Is God male? It may seem to many readers that the answer is “Yes! All of my life I have heard God spoken of as ‘he’.” Is this because the Christian God is really a male deity? Is it possible to speak of God as “she” and remain true to Christian faith? Ruether notes that speaking of God in female images and pronouns evokes strong emotions in people. These emotions have deep roots in the pattern of using the name “Father” literally and exclusively when speaking about God.⁶

Among feminists who most strongly react against God as “Father” are those who have decided that the Christian symbolism of a Father-God, the transcendent ruler of the world, makes it impossible for them to accept Christianity. These feminists, in company with Jewish feminists who share their rejection of a masculinized God, have engaged in a thorough critique of male symbols for God that has led them out of Judaism and Christianity. Arguing that a male God both reflects and supports male dominance in society, they believe that women in particular and society as a whole need a female god, a Goddess. Arguing that the emergence of a male God is fairly recent (4500 to 2800 B.C.E.),⁷ these women are turning to pre-Jewish and pre-Christian traditions to develop a religion of the Goddess. There are many differences among Goddess religions, but also a common ***thealogy** (as opposed to a theology) that worships a Goddess figure(s), especially as the Mother(s) who gave birth to the world and continues to sustain it. Goddess thealogy also celebrates memories of societies that were matrilineal (inheritance passed through the female line) and matriarchal (women occupying positions of power in family and society).

Ruether is in sympathy with the desire of women to have a deity who is beneficent to women, but finds post-Christian Goddess religions to be romantic constructions of the feminine that do not match reality. Goddess romanticism

ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER

Rosemary Radford Ruether contributed groundbreaking theological insights to feminism's second wave and continues to be an important contributor to the theology of the third wave of feminism. Her path to feminist theology was by way of Scripps College in Claremont, California, where she began undergraduate work in 1954 with the goal of working in the fine arts and perhaps becoming an artist. She soon became attracted to the humanities and the history of Christian origins. Shortly thereafter, she began to explore the intellectual and social history of late antiquity and early Christianity, and completed a doctorate in this area. In a theological career stretching over several decades, her initial interest was in liberation theology and the interaction between faith and social concerns, especially anti-Semitism in the post-World War II era and militarism during the Vietnam War years. Three highly influential events of the 1960s—the civil rights movement, the emergence of the second wave of feminism, and the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church—were formative experiences for her. As a young adult, Ruether became actively involved in the struggle for civil rights for African Americans and in the feminist movement. Due to the Second Vatican Council, her interest in the roots of Catholicism deepened at the same time. As a result, her writings often focus on the interconnections between Christian theological questions and social action to achieve justice. A Roman Catholic, Ruether teaches at Garrett Evangelical Seminary, a Methodist seminary in Illinois, and has also taught at Howard University and Harvard Divinity School.⁸ Ruether has written or edited at least thirty books and has published over five hundred articles. She contributes often to a weekly newspaper published in the United States, the *National Catholic Reporter*.



is problematic. Claiming that ancient Goddess-dominated religions were nurturing, benign, and peaceful is attractive to many women, yet highly questionable. Such claims need to be sorted out from what can be proved or not proved, from what is utopian and what is actually the case. Goddess theologians need more than idyllic projections of a women-governed egalitarian world. They need

data to provide warrants for their arguments.⁹ In short, in Ruether's assessment Goddess theology is "historically inaccurate and ideologically distorted."¹⁰ It inappropriately denies the possibility of positive resources in the biblical tradition for symbols for God that resonate with women's experience. To promote the reversal of a masculinized God in an absolutized feminine Goddess promotes women, most of whom are well-educated Europeans and Euro-Americans, to be the gender and social group that normatively possesses the image of God and represents God on earth. This makes Goddess theology worthy of being critiqued as idolatry every bit as much as an absolutized masculine God is.

Associating the divine exclusively with either masculine or feminine gender qualities puts unnecessary limits on divine reality. Christianity has long recognized that God is a mystery surpassing human understanding. Augustine drew attention to this when he pointed out that if someone believes to have understood who God is, then what that person has understood is not God.¹¹ A consistent tradition in Christianity is that God is a reality with such unsurpassable content that every idea about or image for God falls short of the divine reality. None of the individual names, images, symbols, or concepts for God in Christian God-talk can ever capture who or what God is. There is always more to God than can ever be put into words. When Christian feminism associates understanding with its hermeneutics, it is not speaking of comprehending God in the sense of grasping an absolute truth, but of being engaged in apprehending God in the context of meaningful relationship.

Because this is the case, Ruether stresses in the quotation cited at the beginning of this chapter that God-language must never be regarded to be literal. This is why hermeneutics is so important. God-language is intrinsically related to the world and to human experience that is "worldly," that is profoundly affected by our historical and social context. Put simply, God-language is more about relationship than definition. Because God-language is not literal, the language one uses in reference to God can never be equated with who or what God is. To promote such an equation is to make an idol of a particular concept or image for God. This is why Ruether stresses that equating a particular image drawn from one gender and one sociological context with God is idolatry. There is also more at stake, however, where women are concerned. When women imagine God to be a male deity, they tend to relate to God as "the other" but not "like me." This is one of the key problems that Goddess theology seeks to remedy. When women relate to God in female terms, they relate to God as more "like me." Images drawn from women's experience can strengthen the bonds of intimacy that women have with God.

Christian feminist theologians argue (in contrast to the post-Christian Goddess feminists) that drawing attention to female imagery for God need not completely negate male imagery for God. Male symbols can be a meaningful resource for helping people to relate to God. The title "Father" is an important way in which Christians have addressed God since Jesus first shared how he prayed with his followers. The "Our Father" that Christians pray is based on the prayer found in Matt. 6:9–13: "This is how you are to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." Yet, it is likely that Jesus' address was ac-

tually the more familiar *Abba*, meaning "Dad."¹² *Abba* expresses Jesus' special intimacy with God as a loving parent.

In the Christian tradition, God as Father plays an important role. Worship in the congregations of almost any Christian denomination is addressed primarily to God as Father. But an exclusive emphasis on speaking of God as Father can also contribute to a limited understanding of God, an understanding that has the potentiality for idolatry. For males, whether potential or actual fathers, to find in a Father-God a reflection of themselves is an instinctual response. This has resulted in a hierarchy that has long prevailed in the Christian tradition: Father-God, male, female, earth. This hierarchy creates an unnecessary distance between women and the God to whom they pray that can present difficulties for women in their spirituality.

Ruether believes that the use of parent analogues when speaking to or about God is natural for humans. The human experience of a personal relationship with a father has something in common with many people's experience of God. Our parents are the immediate source of our existence and the persons from whom most children learn fundamental trust. To "Father," Ruether adds "Mother," a less common address for God in the Christian tradition, because she believes that language for God should be gender inclusive. A deeper understanding of God is enabled by not limiting God to Father. But she also draws attention to the limitations associated with all parental God-language. Whether God is addressed as Father or Mother, it is wise to keep in mind that "parent language must be recognized as a limited language for God. It does not exhaust the way we should image our relationship to God."¹³ We must balance, therefore, our parental language for God with other images.

Some have argued that the best solution for resolving the God-language problem is to use gender-neutral (nonsexist) language for God. But the use of "God" as if it were a gender-neutral name can be tedious and does not actually challenge the prevailing belief that God is male. Gender-neutral language tends to be heard as male unless the imagery or pronouns are explicitly female. At best, gender-neutral language avoids giving offense to those who object to male-only God-language. Yet, it does not help women to identify with God, as creatures made in God's own image and likeness. Put simply, gender-neutral names for God do not contribute to the full humanity of women.

In the remainder of this chapter, therefore, language for God found in the Bible and the Christian Trinitarian tradition will be explored. Feminine God-language will be highlighted with the objective of helping the reader achieve a balanced and possibly richer understanding of God. Many types of God-language are surveyed here because what is brought clearly into focus in one form may remain hidden in another. Our first task is to examine the types of God-language in the Bible. Our sources are Euro-American feminist scholarship because this was the first to make a substantial contribution to a critical analysis of biblical God-language. In this section of the chapter, attention is given to names, functional designations, narrative metaphors, and personifications for God in the Old and New Testaments. We are particularly interested in what recent feminist research has lifted up in the Christian sources that have

long gone unnoticed. The core doctrine of Christian revelation, the Trinity, is also examined to further appreciate the richness of the Christian understanding of God.

It has already been noted that in the early stages of the second wave of feminism, Euro-American feminist theologians tended to ignore the realities of the lives and the perspectives on God of women outside of their own social group. In the mid-1980s, womanist theologian Delores Williams (whose interpretation of the relationship of Sarah and Hagar was presented in the previous chapter) chastised Rosemary Radford Ruether—and by implication, most Euro-American feminists—for failing to address the effects of racism and classism in their theologies. Responding to Ruether's "Feminism in the Academy,"¹⁴ Williams writes: "Just as Christian patriarchy only makes visible and valuable the concerns of men, Ruether gives visibility and authority to the concerns of white, non-poor [well-educated] feminist women,"¹⁵ thereby neglecting everyone else. Williams's critique, a little harsh given Ruether's personal history of involvement in civil rights for African Americans, does draw attention to Euro-American feminists' tendency to neglect the perspectives of women outside of their own social location. To focus on the theology of God being done only by Euro-American feminists would result not only in making the insights of one sociological group normative, but also in an impoverished sense of God and possibly even in idolatry. In order to have a fuller and richer sense of God, womanist, Hispanic, African, and Asian feminist perspectives on God must also be surveyed.

God-language functions in myriad ways. In the conclusions section of this chapter the implications of God-language and symbols for women's self-understanding are probed. The focus is on the connection between God symbolism and biblically rooted belief that humans, male and female, are made in the image of God (see Gen. 1:26-27). In this section the interrelationship of God images and gender attitudes is explored. Throughout, our guiding question is, What are the most appropriate ways to speak about God?

Euro-American Feminist Perspectives on Biblical God-Language

To respond adequately to this question of how to speak about God, it is important to note the early emergence of this question in Euro-American feminist thought. In 1968, Mary Daly, an American philosopher of religion, wrote a groundbreaking book, *The Church and the Second Sex*, in which she briefly drew attention to problems with how God was imaged in Christian churches. She wrote that although "no theologian or biblical scholar believes that God literally belongs to the male sex... the absurd idea lingers on in the minds of theologians, preachers and simple believers."¹⁶ In 1973, Daly published *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, in which she argued that if women's liberation was to succeed, it must be religious in its vision.¹⁷ Daly's books served as a catalyst for many women to decide to engage in an academic study of theology and its sources.

Much of that study has been directed to the Bible. If you read the Bible carefully, you will find that it contains many ways of speaking about God. Some are far more significant than others. God is associated with fire (Deut. 4:24), the sun (Ps. 84:11), and other inanimate objects of nature, including rocks and mountains. Animals, such as a mother bear (Hos. 13:8), a mother eagle (Deut. 32:11–12), and a mother-hen (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34), are used in reference to God. But none of these are as important as the personal references, especially the names and narrative metaphors, that the biblical authors use in their speaking to and about God.

Major Names for God

Biblical authors did not concern themselves with abstract definitions for God. Rather, they portray God through images and symbols in the context of stories. In these stories God is usually the subject of the narrative and not an object of thought. Because of the narrative context for talk about God, the Scriptures have numerous images, symbols, and names for God. The Old Testament has numerous narrative images for God, but none has traditionally been regarded to be of greater importance than the name God is said to have revealed to Moses in Exod. 3:14, "YHWH" ("’ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh"), consisting of the repeated verb "to be" (*hayah*). This name is revealed in the context of a story in which Moses is watching the sheep of his father-in-law on Mount Horeb. As the story unfolds, Moses comes upon a burning bush, and a conversation with God ensues.

Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask of me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am" [*’ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh*]. He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" (Exod. 3:13–14)

Except for the sheep, Moses is alone when he receives the gift of the sacred name for God. No women were present with Moses on the mountain, but some very significant women in Moses' life are in the background of this encounter. As noted in the previous chapter, without the intervention of the unnamed women who saved him in his infancy, Moses would not have been alive to have this conversation with God. To protect him from the murderous knife of the Egyptian pharaoh, his mother hid him among the foliage along the banks of the Nile. The pharaoh's own daughter sent the infant Moses back to his own mother to be nursed, and later raised Moses as part of her family. She did these things even though she knew he was "one of the Hebrew children" her father sought to kill (Exod. 2:1–10). These women not only preserved Moses' bodily existence, but also influenced his religious formation.

In chapter 3 of Exodus, the adult Moses is receptive to the mysterious manifestation of God. As is often the case in the Bible, God initiates the encounter. Although the place of the meeting is secluded and the manifestation of God in a burning bush enigmatic, it is clear that the God whom Moses meets is a "near"

rather than a "distant" God. In radical proximity, God speaks to Moses. Yet, the name that God reveals to him is shrouded in mystery.

YHWH, the name that God revealed to Moses, appears frequently in the Old Testament—more than six thousand times. Although translated in most English Bibles as "I am (who I am)," it is a very complex word that defies a simple, clear-cut translation.¹⁸ Sandra Schneiders points out that what is rendered as "YHWH" is a form of the verb "to be" and not a proper name per se. The first-person form of the verb reflects the gender of the speaker.¹⁹ It is therefore feasible that YHWH could be interpreted to indicate that the God of Israel is either male or female, or encompasses both genders at once. Nevertheless, in the text there is evidence of the assumption that the God who calls out to Moses from the burning bush is male. A masculine pronoun is used in reference to the God whom Moses meets: "What is his name?" (Exod. 3:13).

Why is Yahweh regarded to be male? An application of a hermeneutics of suspicion brings to light the patriarchal influence on Israel's names for God. Masculine pronouns for God comply with a pattern of speech already in existence when chapter 3 of Exodus was composed. The choice of a masculine pronoun also reflects the reference, found a few verses earlier, to the God of the great male leaders of Israel—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod. 3:15). How women—such as Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah—experienced God is not given the emphasis that the experience of God by certain men is given. Women's experience of God receives no public recognition. The ancestral lineage is traced through the male line. The society is patrilineal, and God symbolism leading up to Moses' unique encounter of the divine presence is patrilineal.

Because of Moses' important role in the exodus of the Hebrew people from slavery to freedom, the name for God that the Bible records being given to Moses became very important in both the Jewish and the Christian traditions. The name YHWH became so revered that it was not spoken aloud by religiously observant Jews. Out of respect for this divine name, when Jews come to YHWH in a biblical passage they substitute the Hebrew word *Adonai*, which in the Greek Septuagint is *Kyrios* and in the Latin Vulgate is *Dominus*. All are masculine nouns rendered in English as "Lord." In the recent New Revised Standard Version (1990) of the Old Testament the word *LORD* appears.²⁰ *Adonai*, *Kyrios*, *Dominus*, and *LORD* obscure the fact that YHWH is a name for God and not a title, wrongly suggesting that YHWH has a male identification. This word choice is all the more troublesome because "Lord" carries with it the added baggage of a term often associated with power over others. Therefore, imagery associated with "Lord" is not only male; it is also patriarchal.

What might have been Moses' primary analogue for the name YHWH? It is likely that the experiential analogue for "I am (who I am)" is God's abiding presence. The divine presence was with Moses' ancestors in the form of a promise of progeny more numerous than the stars. This presence was encountered by Moses on the mountain with the promise of freedom and a land described as a place of "milk and honey." This same presence will be ever offered to those who are receptive and will be experienced in the form in which people most need it.

As we noted, the name YHWH is extremely complex, and with the passage of time, the mysterious immanence of God that Moses recognized on Mount Horeb was recast by the practice of never pronouncing "YHWH" aloud. YHWH, the name for God that appears in Genesis 2 when God takes mud from the earth and makes the first human creature and the animals, is intimately part of the story of God's relationship to creation from the time of the earliest texts of the Hebrew Bible. Yet, paradoxically, transcendent distance and otherness became associated with YHWH. It is helpful to keep in mind that God-YHWH is wholly immanent — closer to each of us than we are to ourselves — and yet wholly transcendent. At first glance, this statement may appear to be contradictory, but actually it affirms the mysteriousness of God.

Since YHWH transcends the limitations of gender, Elizabeth Johnson, a Catholic feminist theologian, has proposed that the name be translated as "She Who Is." This feminist translation fits when one considers that in Genesis 2, YHWH is depicted as a divine relational being who gives life to the world as "pure aliveness."²¹ Moreover, because this God is first encountered at the burning bush during a time of great persecution of the enslaved tribes of Israel, YHWH also functions to bring to mind a personal, compassionate, faithful God who sustains a loving relationship with a people struggling under bitter oppression. The God who is revealed in each of these narratives — the One who is — could be spoken of as She Who Is, "a robust, appropriate name for God."²²

Persons unfamiliar with the formation of the Bible might assume that from the very beginning of their history the people of Israel were committed to belief in one God. Although the Ten Commandments do include this statement: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2–3), exclusive emphasis on one God emerged only gradually among the tribes of Israel. The emergence of monotheism had a long history.

It was not until the Babylonian exile period (late 500s B.C.E.) that the Jewish people gave YHWH special status among the other deities as *the* God of land and nation. In the early history of Israel it was not uncommon for female deities to appear alongside male ones, as in the cases of Asherah (2 Kings 23:7)²³ and the Queen of Heaven (Jer. 44:25). But gradually female deities were pushed into the background. Prior to the Babylonian exile the people of Israel worshiped YHWH without explicitly denying the existence of other deities to whom homage was sometimes paid. For example, various "El" deities such as El Elyon, "God Most High" (Gen. 14:18–19); El Shaddai, "God Almighty" (Gen. 17:1); and El Olam, "Eternal God" (Gen. 21:33) were honored.

Etymologically related to El Elyon, El Shaddai, and El Olam is ***Elohim**, another Hebrew word for God frequently found in the Old Testament. Technically speaking, it is not a proper name for God; neither male nor female pronouns directly fit it. "Elohim" is a generic term for God, likely of Canaanite origin. It is probably derived from a root denoting strength or power. There is some speculation that it may have been composed of "Eloh," feminine singular for "goddess," and an added masculine plural ending, "im." If this is the case, then the word may be rendered as "god," "goddess," "gods," or simply by the generic

term "deity." Where "God" appears in English Bibles, "Elohim" is most often the word in the original Hebrew. "El" words for deities occurred throughout the ancient Middle East.²⁴ Although at one time distinct from one another, Elohim and YHWH gradually became identified with each other, referring to the one God of Judaism.

"Spirit" is also a name for God of Old Testament origin. It is more obscure than "YHWH" and "Elohim." In Hebrew, the word often rendered as "Spirit" is *ruah*, a feminine noun, also meaning "breath" or "wind." Its Greek equivalent is *pneuma*, a neuter noun. According to Joanna van Wijk-Bos, when *ruah* and *pneuma* are linked with God, "God's vitality and power as they affect creation" are affirmed.²⁵ Since *ruah* is a noun of feminine gender, it may be appropriate to argue that the presence of God's Spirit in the Hebrew Bible is female, especially since it is associated with the divine work of creation, of giving life. For example, in Ps. 104:30 it is the Spirit who creates:

You send your Spirit and they are created;
you renew the face of the Earth.

A comparable theme is found in the opening verses of the story of creation in Gen. 1:1–2. Wijk-Bos renders these initial verses this way:

When God began to create,
the earth was a trackless waste;
darkness was on the face of the deep
and the Spirit of God, she was hovering
on the face of the deep.²⁶

Her translation with the addition of "she was hovering" makes explicit that "Spirit" is a feminine noun. While it is true that *ruah* is feminine in Hebrew, caution is required in the use of the pronoun "she" in this verse. As Johnson points out, in inflected languages a word's grammatical gender does not necessarily indicate the femaleness or maleness of the object or reality to which it refers.²⁷ In some languages the word for "sun" has a masculine ending and in others a feminine one, but no one thinks of the sun as a male or female star. Attributing a feminine nature to the divine Spirit in the Old Testament is not necessarily appropriate exclusively on the grounds that *ruah* is a noun of feminine gender. In the Old Testament the Spirit is also portrayed as being present in the expected Messiah (Isa. 42:1–4) and as being the agent of a new creation that will arise when the old order has finally passed away (Ezek. 36:26, 37:1–6). The ways in which the Spirit is life-giving are rich and varied.

In the New Testament, the presence of the Spirit is the occasion of two major events. The first is the ***incarnation** of Jesus. According to Luke, the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, making the birth of Jesus possible (Luke 1:35). The second is the presence of the Spirit at Pentecost, the "birth" of the Christian church (Acts 2:1–4). In neither of these occurrences is the presence of God explicitly male or female. When the Spirit is depicted in Christian art, the Spirit is not imaged as a male or female person, but as a dove (recalling Jesus' baptism) or fire (recalling the tongues of fire associated with Pentecost).

Functional Designations for God

Functional designations refer to specific activities attributed to God in the Old Testament.²⁸ Terms like "Creator," "Covenant Maker," and "Liberator" are associated with God's works revealed in the Bible. Biblical faith affirms that it was God who created all things (e.g., Gen. 1:1–2:4a), who initiated a relationship with the people of Israel in a sacred covenant (e.g., Exodus 20), and who liberated the people from slavery in Egypt (e.g., Exodus 12–14). These designations describe who God was to the people when the Bible was being formed. Although none of these designations or the activities to which they refer is inherently masculine, it is likely that the people imagined God to be male when doing these things due to the influence of patriarchy on their culture. This is the case even though these functional designations are not actually gender specific.

Analogies and Metaphors for God

God-language found in the Bible is both analogical and metaphorical. One of the things that makes language about God different from other forms of language is that God-language has a distinctive "is" and "is not" dynamic to it. In the case of analogical language, for example, when we find attributes closely associated with God, such as God is just or God is good, these affirmations also contain inherent negations: God is not just or good in exactly the same way that we experience humans being just or good. God is just and good in a superlative way. God's justice is without self-interest; God's goodness is boundless perfection.

In the case of metaphors for God, the "is" and "is not" tension is more pronounced. In a metaphor, ideas that are very different are brought together to facilitate the emergence of new understandings in a particular time and place. For example, in the Bible, God is said to be a rock (Deut. 32:15). But obviously, to assert on a literal level that God is an inanimate mineral deposit is absurd. "Rock" applied to God implies a set of qualities, particularly ones that focus on stability and reliability, that rose in the consciousness of the believing community at a particular time. Metaphors are figures of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily means one thing is used to express a different meaning. Sallie McFague, a Protestant feminist scholar and author of *Metaphorical Theology*, stresses that human reliance on use of metaphors is not merely poetic ornamentation. From the time we are infants we construct our understanding of the world through metaphors that are imbedded in stories.²⁹ A metaphor is a type of comparison in which there is an inherent tension between what would be absurd on a literal level and the reality to which it points. "All the world's a stage" is a familiar metaphor from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. We frequently use such literary metaphors to convey a perceived similarity, while fully cognizant that literally equating our earthly environment with a stage on which a play is being enacted isn't quite logical. McFague stresses that a metaphor finds similarity in the midst of dissimilarity and therefore not only says "is not" but also "is," not only "no" but also "yes."³⁰

In the Bible, metaphors play a role in the emerging story of the divine-human

relationship. Metaphors for God in the Bible are figurative and should not be taken literally. "Father" is both a metaphor for God and an analogy. It has already been noted that the male parent is an important analogue for God. But the title "Father" is also metaphorical, having an "is" and "is not" tension. Viewing "Father" in reference to God as a metaphor draws more explicit attention to the inherent tension in naming God "Father." God's fatherhood is more unlike than like the fatherhood of human fathers. If the necessary "is not" element is not given due consideration, then the title "Father" may become a literalism or even a definition for God. Sandra Schneiders draws attention to the danger involved in the neglect of the "is not" element: "A literalized metaphor paralyzes the imagination."³¹ It can hold the imagination captive in a conception that is too narrow to encompass the mystery of God.

Parables attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are extended metaphors, many of which convey an understanding of God that has an element of surprise. In the one known as the "parable of the prodigal son," Jesus presents a verbal picture of the kind of father God is (Luke 15:11–32). The son chose to leave home and squander his inheritance, and was reduced to tending swine, thereby making himself unclean according to Jewish law. A young man who should have been an outcast to his own family is then welcomed home with open arms by his father. The father's extravagant and unconditional love for his prodigal son sharply contrasts with his son's behavior. In the story, Jesus presents God not as a condemning patriarch but as a patient and loving parent.

In the Bible there are many additional masculine metaphors for God. One of the most popular Old Testament metaphors is "Good Shepherd," the tender caretaker concerned for the safety and well-being of the flock (Psalm 23, cf. Ezekiel 34). Shepherds, usually nomadic, were often members of the landless class, and yet Israel combined the shepherd's care with divine sovereignty in the form of a lengthy blessing bestowed on Joseph, son of Rachel, arguably the favorite wife of the patriarch Jacob:

[B]y the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob,
by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,
by the God of your father, who will help you,
by the Almighty, who will bless you,
with blessings of the heaven above,
blessings of the deep that lies beneath,
blessings of the breasts and of the womb.
The blessings of your father are stronger
than the blessings of the eternal mountains,
the bounties of the everlasting hills;
may they be on the head of Joseph,
on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.
(Gen. 49:24–25)

Masculine sovereignty is even more explicitly associated with God depicted as a king: "For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth" (Ps. 47:2). The psalmists also combine the king metaphor with the metaphor of

God as a judge: "The Lord is king! . . . He will judge the people with equity" (Ps. 96:10). The divine king is not only judge, but also victorious warrior: "Who is the King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle" (Ps. 24:8). The combination of king, judge, and warrior imagery can leave one with the impression that God is a judgmental and domineering ruler. But the people of Israel also attributed to the divine kings involvement with the earth:

Yet God my King is from old,
working salvation in the earth. . . .
You opened up springs and torrents,
brought dry land out of the primeval waters.
Yours the day and yours the night;
you set the moon and sun in place.
(Ps. 74:12, 15–16)

Although less prevalent, metaphors for God particular to women's realities also appear in the Bible. A maternal metaphor for God appears in conjunction with Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. According to the interpretation of the author of Deuteronomy, writing over six hundred years after the Exodus, upon Moses' completion of the task of writing the law, the people are told why they need it: "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth" (Deut. 32:18). The author uses the device of a "mixed metaphor" to get an important point across. In the midst of recounting the people's past misdeeds, the Deuteronomic author reminds them that they lost their way. They forgot the divine Mother, the rocklike (and breast-endowed) dependable source from whom they, and all of creation, received life. Mindfulness of the Mother who gives birth is basic to a proper relationship with God.

Motherhood metaphors appear elsewhere in the Bible. In Isa. 49:15, God's faithfulness is depicted as the steadfast love of a nursing mother. In Isa. 66:13, the people of Israel are assured that God cherishes them with a mother's love:

As a mother comforts her child,
so will I comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

In Isa. 42:14, God is depicted as a woman in the pangs of childbirth, suffering with Israel in the people's longing for a rebirth of freedom. Jesus in John's Gospel also uses the metaphor of a woman in labor to give comfort to his disciples as his death draws near:

When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16:21–22)

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul depicts salvation as a birthing process:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we await for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:22)

Paul also used birth images in reference to his apostolic mission (Gal. 4:19).

Female Personifications

Predicating personality to God involves gender specificity. Wisdom (*Hokmah* in Hebrew, and *Sophia* in Greek — feminine-gender nouns in both languages) is being given increasing attention as an important personification for God. Wisdom is more than a feminine noun in the Old Testament; it is also a title for a type of literature. One of the objectives of ***Wisdom literature** is to transmit lessons that nurture life. Its broad themes can be found in the literature of other ancient Near Eastern civilizations, especially Egypt. One of the outstanding traits of biblical Wisdom literature is the personification of Wisdom as a female presence of God.

Ambiguity has long surrounded *Hokmah* and *Sophia*. Ambiguity exists because the development of the feminine Wisdom figure proceeded over several centuries and has many nuances. Sometimes, wisdom is a divine quality, not distinct from God, but not totally identified with God either. In other instances, particularly in texts focused on creation, wisdom is personified so that the figure of Wisdom appears to have taken on the status of a divine person, a female deity who is the co-creator with YHWH. In these cases, Wisdom (*Hokmah/Sophia*) is "Woman Wisdom" or "Lady Wisdom."

A careful examination of biblical texts in which *Hokmah* and *Sophia* appear is in order. Wisdom (*Hokmah*) is featured in Proverbs 1–9 and Job 28, with her role expanded further in the Wisdom of Solomon and in Sirach.³² Although attributed to Solomon, which would mean that it was written in the 900s B.C.E., the book of Proverbs was more likely completed at least three hundred years after Solomon's death. Proverbs is a collection of sayings without a discernible unified theme. In it are several texts where a unique Wisdom figure is featured. The first is Prov. 1:20–33, where Wisdom speaks in a way that asserts divine status:

She [Wisdom] cries out in the street . . .
at the entrance of the city gate she speaks:
"How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?
Give heed to my reproof;
I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you."

More contours are given to the picture of Wisdom in Prov. 3:19 that express the special role of Wisdom in creation: "The Lord by Wisdom founded the earth." Wisdom is symbolically spoken of as the tree of life and giver of life (Prov. 3:18; 4:13). As Proverbs progresses, this Wisdom figure is depicted as a person with many of the traits of Egyptian goddesses, such as Ma'at, a champion of truth and justice for her people and protector of the right order for

the universe, and Isis, a popular goddess associated with the gift of life whose symbol is the ankh. In Isis literature, the goddess is praised as the creator of the universe. She divided the earth from the heavens, set forth the path of the stars, and guided the sun and moon in their daily journeys.

In the eighth chapter of Proverbs, traits of ancient goddesses are also evident. Like the goddess Ma'at, the female Wisdom figure walks in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice (v. 20). A few verses later the focus shifts to creation. The female Wisdom figure is said to have existed prior to creation (vv. 22–26), been present when God began the preliminary actions of creation (vv. 27–29), served as the fashioner of creation beside God (v. 30), and rejoiced in the inhabited world and delighted in the human race (v. 31). Wisdom also turns toward human creatures, soliciting their adherence to her divine ways. She declares, "Happy are those who keep my ways. Hear my instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it" (vv. 32–33).

Proverbs 8 has become the subject of considerable debate. Is Wisdom a female personification of God?³³ Is the Wisdom figure a divine hypostasis of God; that is, has what has usually been considered a personal trait of the divine — wisdom — been transformed over time in the faith of the people into a person with her own distinct existence? Many scholars today do believe this to be the case. Wisdom had a special origin, prior to creation, and an active part in the divine works of creating and promoting justice. The mystery that surrounds Wisdom is affirmed in Job 28. Here, Wisdom is presented in a preliminary stage of personification. The author of Job depicts God asking, "Where does wisdom come from?" (v. 20). The answer is that this mysterious divine figure is truly known only by God: "God understands the way to it [lit., 'her'], and knows its [lit., 'her'] place" (v. 23).

The figure of personified Wisdom reached its peak as a female divine presence late in the history of pre-Christian Judaism in the books of Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. Scholars believe that Sirach was written during the initial decades of the second century B.C.E., prior to 175 B.C.E. In this book, Wisdom once again appears as mysteriously produced by God. And once again she speaks, declaring her origin, status, and special role in creation:

I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,
and covered the earth like a mist,
I dwelt in the highest heavens,
and my throne was in a pillar of cloud.
Alone I encompassed the vault of heaven and
traversed the depths of the abyss. (Sir. 24:3–5)

Woman Wisdom recalls how she searched throughout the world for a resting place and was told to pitch her tent among the people of Israel (Sir. 24:7–8). Once there, she flourished and continued to issue her invitation: "Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits" (Sir. 24:19).

In Sirach, Woman Wisdom also is said to have a close connection to Torah and the sacred covenant with God (Sir. 24:23). Torah is the heart of the sacred teachings for the people of Israel. It is Sirach's Woman Wisdom who will

also pour out teaching like prophecy and will leave it as a legacy for future generations (Sir. 24:33).

The teaching of Woman Wisdom is given extensive attention in the Wisdom of Solomon, another book attributed to Solomon, but, like Proverbs, having no direct connection to him. Scholars believe that the Wisdom of Solomon was written in Greek by Diaspora Jews in Hellenized Alexandria, Egypt, during the first century B.C.E., likely before the Romans conquered Palestine in 67 B.C.E. In this book, Woman Wisdom, *Sophia*, is presented as a people-loving spirit who will not enter deceitful souls (Wisd. 1:4–6). In chapter 7, *Sophia* not only acts as the Creator in the beginning, but also is part of the ongoing creative process (v. 11). She is described as the fashioner of all things (v. 22), responsible for their existence and thus aware of their secrets. *Sophia* is also a spirit who is intelligent, holy, unique, subtle, loving the good, and ever steadfast (vv. 22–23). In Wisd. 7:27, unlimited power is ascribed to *Sophia* (Woman Wisdom):

Although she is but one, she can do all things,
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
in every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God and prophets.

Sophia reaches to the ends of the earth and orders all things (Wisd. 8:1). Redemption is also granted through her. It is she who gives life and immortality to the persecuted just (Wisd. 8:13). In Wisdom 9 is an impassioned prayer for the divine *Sophia*, because she knows and understands all things. In particular, she can enable those who desire her to know what is truly pleasing to God (Wisd. 9:10–11). Her role in salvation is expanded in Wisdom 10: the story of Israel's salvation history is reinterpreted from the first human being to the Exodus in the light of *Sophia*'s pervasive saving power, attributing to her the saving deeds that elsewhere are attributed to YHWH.

By way of summary, among Woman Wisdom's distinctive characteristics one finds the following:

- her divine origin: Prov. 8:22; Sir. 24:3, 9; Wisd. 7:25–26
- her existence before creation and her role in creating: Prov. 3:19; 8:22–29; Sir. 1:4, 9–11; Wisd. 7:22; 8:4–6; 9:9
- her identification with the divine spirit: Wisd. 1:6–7; 9:17
- her immanent presence in the world: Wisd. 7:24; 8:1³⁴

As her tradition unfolds, Wisdom becomes more and more a female personification of God. It is the position of Elizabeth Johnson that "Sophia's activity is none other than the activity of God."³⁵ She personifies divine reality in "an expression of the most intense divine presence in the world."³⁶ Woman Wisdom seems, therefore, to be equivalently divine, as YHWH is divine.

In the New Testament the divine Wisdom figure is closely associated with the life and mission of Jesus. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's research has led her to conclude that the early Christians perceived the God of Jesus as divine *Sophia*.³⁷ To many readers such a claim may appear to be illogical, since Jesus addressed

God as "*Abba*" ("Father" [Mark 14:36]). But Jesus' use of "Father" in reference to God may have a great deal to do with the patriarchal culture of first-century Palestine. As noted in the previous chapter, women were subordinate to men. The people, no doubt, would not have been able to really hear Jesus' message if he had addressed his prayer to the divine Mother, Woman Wisdom. This could have jeopardized his mission.

Since Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon were written relatively close to the time of Jesus, their influence on the early Christian interpreters of the life and mission of Jesus after his death and resurrection is not surprising. The figure of Woman Wisdom likely lies behind how the early Christians viewed the uniqueness of Jesus, whom they confessed to be God incarnate and the firstborn of creation. This is evident in this excerpt from an ancient hymn found in the letter to the Colossians, composed by Paul or one of his followers:

He [Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones and dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. (Col. 1:15–17; cf. Prov. 8:27–30)

This hymn is compared not only with Prov. 8:27–30, but also with the Prologue of John's Gospel (John 1:1–5, 10–14). In professing faith in the divinity of Jesus, John uses the masculine-gender Greek term *Logos* instead of the feminine *Sophia*, but it is clear that the ideas John expresses in the prologue are rooted in what is said about Woman Wisdom in the Old Testament's Wisdom literature. This rendition of John 1:1–4a, 14, makes the connection clear:

In the beginning was *Sophia* [*Logos*-Word],
Sophia was in God's presence,
Sophia was God.
 She was present with God in the beginning.
 Through *Sophia* all things were made [cf. Prov. 3:19; 8:22–31].
 Apart from her nothing came to be.
 That which came to be in her was life.

Sophia became flesh and lived among us
 [lit., "pitched her tent among us"; cf. Sir. 24:8],
 and we have seen her glory in Jesus, who is full of grace and truth.

Did John's community envision Jesus to be the incarnation of the preexistent *Sophia*, the beloved Woman Wisdom, with God from the very beginning, ever active in creation, descended from heaven to dwell on earth? The evidence lends itself to a positive response.

In sum, what the early Johannine Christians experienced in Jesus' words and deeds led them to connect him with *Sophia* and confess him to be *Sophia* incarnate, living among and for the sake of creatures. John's identification of Jesus with *Sophia*, along with the Colossian confession that Jesus Christ is the firstborn of all creation, the one in whom all things were created (Col. 1:15–16),

has profound consequences for Christian faith. It enabled the early Christians to attribute cosmic significance to the crucified and risen Jesus, relating him to the whole of creation. As *Sophia* made flesh, Jesus is co-creator with the Father, and intimately and actively involved in the world.

The significance of Jesus' involvement with creation is made explicit also in a key passage in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' role as prophetic messenger is illumined by deeds associated with divine Woman Wisdom in Matthew's Gospel. Memories of Jesus' actions no doubt led early Christians to see him as her emissary, especially to those who suffer injustice. Like *Hokmah/Sophia*, Jesus is "vindicated by her deeds" (Matt. 11:19). These words are preceded by a description of Jesus' acts of compassion for the needy he encountered: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them (Matt. 11:5). Echoing *Hokmah/Sophia*'s message, Jesus declares,

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28–30; cf. Sir. 24:19)

Schüssler Fiorenza reflects that as the "child of *Sophia*," Jesus stands in a long line of prophets sent to gather the children of Israel to their gracious God. Jesus' death on the cross results from his mission as prophet of *Sophia*-God, a mission on behalf of the poor and outcasts.³⁸ After Jesus' execution, his disciples continue what Jesus himself had done, making the all-inclusive love of *Sophia*-God incarnate in Jesus available to others. Among these disciples are women who experienced the gracious compassion of Jesus' God. Some of these women, such as Mary Magdalene (whom we met in the previous chapter), would become leaders in the new Jesus movement.³⁹

In summary, God-language in the Bible is varied and complex. Although references to God are usually made with masculine pronouns, there are many reasons why it is reductionistic to equate God with maleness. The biblical authors knew this intuitively and therefore drew upon female metaphors and personifications for God to express their developing faith.

The analogical and metaphorical nature of God-language means that God can be related to as both male and female. But the "is not" element present in analogues and metaphors requires us also to keep in mind that God is neither male nor female. God is an all-encompassing mystery and is more than any particular name, functional designation, analogue, metaphor, or personification can express. Yet, all of these language forms found in the texts of the Bible can assist people in developing a meaningful relationship to God.

The Christian God, a Trinitarian Community

The triune revelation of God in the New Testament plays such a strong role in the worship and theology of Christian churches that no theology can claim to be Christian if it focuses on God apart from Jesus Christ (his life, death, and res-



David accompanied by Wisdom on the left and Prophecy on the right
Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York

urrection) and the Holy Spirit (the ***Paraclete**, who consoles Christians in the midst of life's struggles and challenges Christians to give prophetic witness to the God of love). When naming the three members of the community of "persons"⁴⁰ that is the incomprehensible One God of Christianity, immediately we are aware that the first two are referred to with explicitly male designations, "Father" and "Son," and the third, the Holy Spirit, is more ambiguous where gender is concerned. The hermeneutical issues associated with "Father" have already been addressed. The masculinization of God caused by taking "Father" literally is compounded by the fact that Jesus is confessed to be Son of the divine Father, and the Holy Spirit is referred to as "Lord" in the Nicene Creed. Ample reasons have already been provided to counter a depiction of the divine Trinity in exclusively male terms and symbols in our treatment of "Father" as a metaphorical name and not a literal definition, of Jesus Christ the Son as *Sophia* incarnate, and of the Holy Spirit as life-giving breath, blowing wind, flowing water, and burning fire. Maleness projected onto the triune God of Christian revelation ig-

nors the potential for a Trinitarian theology that relates to feminist values, such as solidarity in diversity, the value of equal and mutual partnerships, and the importance of communion to being a fully human person.

An examination of the potential fruitfulness of the Christian belief in God as triune requires some attention to the historical development of Trinitarian doctrine. Although Christian churches have differently nuanced understandings of God revealed in Jesus Christ, nearly all would agree that a Trinitarian faith is at the heart of Christian belief. Entrance into a Christian church is through baptism "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In many churches, Christians profess their faith in God in a ***creed**, such as the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, in which the gathered community reaffirms its shared belief in One God who is three.

During the early centuries of the church's life, the triune nature of Christianity's theology of God developed gradually. The threefold manner of speaking about God was inaugurated in the New Testament. In a sense, the Christian Scriptures provided the "raw material" from which the doctrine of the Trinity would be developed later. In the formation of Christianity, texts such as Matt. 28:19 ("Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit") and 2 Cor. 13:13 ("The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you") became formative for Christian self-understanding. Matthew 28:19 is important because it became the baptismal formula and 2 Cor. 13:13 because it became a formula commonly used in liturgical prayer. But these two short texts in isolation did not constitute a doctrine or theology of the Trinity.

A well-formulated Trinitarian theology is not to be found in the New Testament. What the New Testament does provide is the basis upon which a Trinitarian theology would be developed through painstaking discernment by Christian leaders. The primary focus of the New Testament is Jesus, whose unique experience of God as *Abba* issues in the confession that Jesus is the Son of God (and is *Sophia* incarnate). The New Testament itself does not make an explicit transfer from the title "Son of God," with which the Gospel of Mark begins, to "God the Son." Nor does it explicitly attribute divine personhood to the Holy Spirit. The New Testament, however, does provide the basis for the church professing the divinity of both the Son and the Holy Spirit later as it struggled to articulate its faith in response to questions that emerged. Father, Son, and Spirit are not so much proper names for God in the New Testament as they are symbols for God emerging from experiences closely connected with Jesus. God is grasped by Jesus' disciples as transcendent (YHWH for Jesus and his followers is *Abba*, loving his children in the mode of a caring parent), as accessible in the reality of an extraordinary historical person (Jesus, the Christ, through whom salvation is offered, especially in his death and resurrection), and as immanent in the world (the life-giving Spirit who both comforts and challenges the community of Jesus' followers).

In the fourth century, questions about the identity of Jesus and his relationship to God emerged with great force. Following the conversion of the Roman

THE NICENE CREED

The core of beliefs expressed in the profession of faith known as the Nicene Creed was composed by Christian bishops in 325 in response to controversies about the identity of Jesus Christ and his relationship to the God to whom he prayed as *Abba* (Father), along with some additions and revisions made at the Council of Constantinople in 381. The official creed of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, the Nicene Creed is accepted by many Protestant churches as well. It is often prayed at Sunday eucharistic liturgies as a public expression of Trinitarian belief.

We believe in one God
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father,
through whom all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he was born of the Virgin Mary,
and became [hu]man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered, died, and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in fulfillment of the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

According to a legend that likely began in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, the Apostles' Creed was written by the apostles listed in the Gospels shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Eastern Christians appear to have no knowledge of this creed of the apostles. Today, many scholars argue that it was very unlikely that this creed was composed by Jesus' followers in the first century. In its present form, this creed is believed to have been written not earlier than the fifth century. It summarizes Christian beliefs expressed in the Nicene Creed.

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the ***communion of saints**,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.

emperor Constantine and the end of the Roman persecution of Christians, there was an enormous influx of new members into the church. Some of the new converts believed that their newly adopted Christian monotheism meant that only God the Father was truly divine. Jesus Christ was a very important mediator between God and creatures, but only the first among creatures and not fully God. Arius was the main representative of this thinking. A popular preacher, Arius offered an interpretation of Jesus Christ's identity that gained wide acceptance, not only because it preserved a monotheistic understanding of God, but also because it was a suitable counterpart to the political pattern of a strict monarchy under the leadership of the powerful emperor, Constantine.

To settle the controversy about the identity of Jesus, Constantine called for a meeting of bishops. At the Council of Nicea (325), the bishops articulated the faith of the church, affirming that Jesus Christ is "one in being with the

Father," and therefore is God the Son. A few years later at the first Council of Constantinople (381), the divinity of the Holy Spirit was affirmed. These two councils established an assured minimum of Trinitarian belief to aid new Christians in their understanding of God. The phrase "one in three persons" became the way for the church to affirm the distinctness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a manner that preserves monotheism.

Although for most of the history of Christianity the three persons of the Trinity have been spoken of as male, female imagery for the Holy Spirit can be found in hymns from early Syriac Christians. In the *Odes of Solomon*, the Spirit is compared to the mother of Christ who gives milk, like the breasts of God.⁴¹ In other texts, such as the *gnostic *Trimorphic Protennoia*, God is imaged as Father, Mother, and Son.⁴²

This gnostic depiction of the Trinity would not prevail in western Christianity. Augustine, whose writings are enormously influential in Western Christianity, argued that depicting the Trinity as a family consisting of father, mother, and child is unworthy of God. The reasons for his rejection of the family analogy are rooted in cultural attitudes about male-female relationships. Man is by nature superior to woman. The husband is head of the wife.⁴³ By implication, if the Holy Spirit is a female person, the Mother, then the Spirit would be subordinate to the Father and the Son. Because of the dominant patriarchal attitudes, Augustine believed that speaking of one of the three in the divine Trinity as a female would compromise the full equality and unity of the Trinity.

These early examples of debate about how to talk about the Trinity, especially in regard to the Holy Spirit, are worthy of note and have reappeared in the twentieth century. Some male theologians have attempted to be responsive to feminist criticisms of the tradition of an all-male Trinity by suggesting, contra Augustine, that the Holy Spirit be regarded as the feminine dimension of the divine, the dimension concerned with giving and nurturing life. An example of this type of accommodation to feminists has been argued by Yves Congar, a French theologian who in the 1980s wrote a multivolume work on the Holy Spirit. He proposed that the Holy Spirit be regarded in Christian theology as the femininity of God in the image of a kind mother.⁴⁴ Elizabeth Johnson points out, however, that there are problems with Congar's well-meaning position and that of others who locate a divine feminine presence in the Holy Spirit. It reduces women's identity to the role of mothering and reinforces patriarchal concepts of femininity.⁴⁵ While motherhood is an important role for women, it is not the only and defining role. Moreover, if only the third person is spoken of as female, that still leaves the first and second persons male. Put simply, God can be spoken of poorly even if a female dimension is included in theological discourse about the Trinity. What is needed, according to Johnson, is "the expression of the fullness of divine power and care depicted in female images."⁴⁶

What, then, is a Christian feminist to do about the apparent maleness of the Trinity? First of all, it must be stressed that belief in God as being three in one should not be equated simplistically with the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These names are not the only ways to speak to and about God. Attention to biblical metaphors for God and how they bear on women's experience is

important. God has many names. Addressing God in male and female imagery will enable both women and men to develop a much richer relationship to the triune God.

Apart from the question of gender-specific persons in the Trinity, there is an important issue that transcends gender: God, for Christianity, is a triune mystery. God in Christianity is not a transcendent monad, but a living and loving community of three profoundly related to one another and to the world. Put simply, in the Trinity, God's self-revelation is in and through relationship. Patricia Wilson-Kastner, an Episcopal priest and theologian, points out that imaging God as a community of three encourages one to focus on relationship as the core of Christian belief.⁴⁷ The history of the Christian tradition shows that there has been a strong tendency in Christianity, especially in the West, to focus on God as if God were strictly a single person. This has contributed to God being imaged as "male, patriarchal and domineering."⁴⁸ A narrow monotheism neglects to take into account that in Christian doctrine God is "at heart relational, not a bare unity, or an isolated divine monarch."⁴⁹ Such a monotheism also neglects important ways in which belief in the Trinity can have practical relevance for our lives.

What could be more practical than recalling that the Christian belief in God as a Trinity of persons affirms relationship as central to who God is? Christianity's God cannot be reduced to merely one person or to three individual deities. God is a communion of three, a trinity of persons for whom being in relationship is not something extrinsic to being God. Trinity as the central symbol of Christian theology has the potential for remolding the identity of Christians as persons. From the perspective of hermeneutics, the Trinitarian symbol gives rise to thought, to a new understanding: to be a person (divine or human) is to be in relationship to others, to support and nurture life in community.

Emphasis on community relationship is not new to Christianity. In the early Trinitarian theology of the East, relatedness was the supreme characteristic of God. The Roman Catholic theologian Catherine LaCugna points out that since the eighth century, Eastern Orthodox Christians have described the Trinitarian relatedness in terms of *perichoresis*, which literally means "being in one another."⁵⁰ The notion of the total permeation of the divine persons of the Trinity corrected Eastern Christianity's tendency to locate the unity of the Trinity in the Father. The word *perichoresis* loses its static abstractness if we draw attention to the fact that closely related words signify revolving action, such as the revolution of a wheel. The verbal form, *perichoreō*, means "to encompass." It is very like another Greek verb, *perichoreuō*, which means to "dance round." If we combine these meanings, we can imagine the Trinity as three persons engaged in a circular dance, circling and encircling one another with unending energy. The Trinitarian *perichoresis*, God as the dancing three, is an example of the use of a picturesque metaphor. In this image each of the dancing three retains individuality, while affirming that collectively they are not separate. Together they exist as God in perfect harmony and unity. Like any God symbolism, *perichoresis* is only moderately helpful. Its strength lies in what it most clearly affirms about God: the relational character of God as a communion of persons. This symbol, of course, dances in opposition to the individualism, competitiveness, and iso-

lationalism of patriarchy. It reflects to the Christian its highest good and its authentic truth: loving community.

Because feminism emphasizes equality, interrelatedness, and mutuality as basis of the world as it ought to be, feminist theology can be greatly enriched by the image of the Trinity as three equal persons dancing together in perfect harmony. The metaphor of enacted harmony in movement and sound in a circular dance, in Wilson-Kastner's opinion, is "a far more appealing, inclusive, revealing sign of the divine than two seated white males and a dove."⁵¹

In the eternal Trinitarian dance the three, though distinct, are one. Love, the foundation of divine life, creates the bond of their unity. It is the rhythm to which the three whirl and intertwine in unending motion. As the dance continues, the persons are united to each other by the bonds of love; uniqueness and unity coexist. The image of the divine *perichoresis* invites everyone, especially Christians, to join in the Trinitarian harmony. To enter into this harmony is to experience the grace of communion with the divine three. The proper response is first and foremost praise with gratitude for the abundance of God's generous and transforming love.

Praise is never meaningfully directed to God in an abstract way. Praise is offered in the midst of living because communion with the triune divine community, although ever imperfect and partial from our side, is an experience of God's steadfast fidelity. This fundamental religious experience has affirming and challenging dimensions that bring about our full personhood. It affirms our effort to develop a community of mutuality with our sisters and brothers with respect for diversity. It supports kinship care for the creatures of the earth on which the human community depends. At the same time it challenges us to be responsive to social and ecological injustices that undermine inclusive community built on equality, mutuality, solidarity, empathy, and compassion. Our communion with other persons and our care for all of creation become aspects of growing communion with the three-personed God. This indeed is something to dance about!

In keeping with the symbolism of the three-personed God, in addition to the perspectives of Euro-American feminists, we now turn to the perspective of the God from representative voices from around the globe, including North American womanist and *mujerista* theologians, and Latin American, African, and Asian women.

African American Womanist Perspectives on God

Alice Walker, the African American woman who coined the term "womanist," is not a theologian by academic education. Nevertheless, in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*, the reader finds a poignant theological conversation between two African American women about God. This is remarkable because Christianity has traditionally played an enormous role in the lives of African American women. In *The Color Purple*, Celie, a rural black woman who is friendless until Shug takes an interest in her, confesses to her friend that