

WOMAN-BODY, MAN-BODY

Knowing God

By WENDY M. WRIGHT

IT SEEMED LIKE SUCH A SIMPLE QUESTION. And the answer seemed almost as straightforward. ‘Do men and women know God differently because they are differently embodied?’ ‘Yes. Although one way of knowing should not be considered superior to the other.’ My own experience of being wife and mother had given me intimations of divine life that were distinct from my husband’s. Furthermore, it was not simply my biological experience as woman that taught me about God. It was my gendered identity, my being a woman in this culture and time, and the subtle roles assigned to me here that shaped my ways of knowing God.

Once I had the question posed and my tentative answer, I began to be attentive to what others might say on the subject. I was not surprised at what I heard.

A middle-aged, married laywoman sat in my office reflecting pensively on her long faith journey. ‘I always felt sort of “unspiritual”. God was always “out there” somewhere, outside family, outside my most intimate womanly experiences. No one ever affirmed them for me as an experience of God’s presence.’

A forty-five-year-old Jesuit visual-artist sat on a park bench beneath the changing colours of autumn and spoke of his prayer: ‘I have always stood before God as a man. Somehow, my masculinity is part of my God-knowing.’

Another Jesuit colleague in his mid-fifties, involved in formation work, commented on the difference he perceives between the men and women to whom he listens as spiritual director. ‘Women seem more likely to speak interpersonally, to dwell on relationships as the place where they find God. Men, on the other hand, seem to focus more on work, on the activities of discipleship.’

Two single female friends attended a women’s ritual group where they explored fresh and invigorating ways of worshipping God and shared the unique woman-stories of their lives.

I studied an article on the topic of spirituality written by a Jewish scholar, which included an emphatic, unfootnoted comment:

We should recognize that men and women/boys and girls may experience this spirituality differently precisely because of their physical differences. Women's spirituality is a whole way of viewing the relationship of women to the Divine in a way which is different from men's spirituality.

As I listened to these and other voices, I felt confirmed in my answer. Yet I also felt strangely perplexed at the unanimity of the responses. Eventually I found myself raising question after question. This article is an attempt to follow the leads of those questions, not so much to arrive at a definitive answer as to explore the various dimensions of the questioning. My propensity for being attentive to others' responses to the query, 'Do men and women know God differently because they are differently embodied?', took me first to the voices of contemporaries. Next, it alerted me to the Buddhist spiritual tradition. Then it led me to the Christian past and the startling variety of responses found there. It teased me back to the contemporary scene and the new scholarship on mysticism. Finally, I found myself once again in the Christian past, this time focusing not on the issue of men and women but on the modalities of knowing God.

The prevailing contemporary answer

We in late-twentieth-century America generally assume that the way a person knows God is shaped by sexual and gender identity. Our bookstore shelves are stocked with numerous titles treating men's and women's spirituality. We wonder whether spiritual traditions which reflect men's experience can adequately articulate women's spiritual lives. We pore over the literary artefacts of our religious foremothers to detect the themes that dominated their religious quests. We contrast these with the lives and writings of their male counterparts. Within Christian denominations, we trouble ourselves about the question of whether women can see themselves imaged in an exclusively male saviour or identify with a deity whose only name is Father. We peruse the literature of the social sciences, which explores the distinctive quality of women's and men's conversations, social interaction, moral reasoning and learning styles, and use that literature to reflect upon religion. We look to contemporary literary analysis, which asserts that a new narrative shape and language is being forged from the particularity of women's experience. We draw upon the thinking of the modern

women's and men's movements, which seek to disclose the group perceptions and symbolic milieux best suited to the two halves of the human whole.¹

Yet the bulk of late-twentieth-century thinking about the topic, while it celebrates and affirms male and female ways of knowing God, shies away from the assertion that men can know God more adequately than women or vice versa. Both genders have equal access to divine intimacy. They are different but equal. We tend to say that men's spiritual narratives are shaped by the adventure of the hero, that autonomy and separation are the masculine ideals that shape the quest, that pride and self-assertion are men's sins, and abstract principles the key to male moral reasoning. We would at the same time claim that women's knowing is, on the whole, relational, acknowledges interdependence and seeks to make and maintain connections, that diffuseness and a lack of self-definition are female sins, and that women's moral reasoning is motivated by an ethics of care.

While thus affirming that our experience of God is rooted in our embodied human experience as male and female, we observe also that within their own groups, women and men have a diversity of life experiences which mediate their knowledge of God. Add to that race, ethnic and cultural identity, economic status and geographical region, and you have a complex of factors that, if God-knowing begins with unique experience, will influence a person as much as gender.

This is basically where we find ourselves today, especially in the American Christian community. God, for us, is not known primarily as uncreated, but is known through the medium of creation. And, fascinated by creation's variousness, we want to celebrate and give voice to all the various ways of being human. This includes the diverse and sexually differentiated ways of knowing God.

It should be noted that, in contemporary discussions that range over the above-cited territory, the assertion is often made that God, in God's essence, is not knowable. Language about God and the human perception of the ultimate (if one can separate the two) are always analogical, metaphorical and symbolic. All such knowledge is mediated. To the extent that we can 'know' the sacred ground of being, we know according to the languages, geographies, cultures, ethnic and religious traditions, eras and genders in which we find ourselves embodied.

Traditional responses to the question

My questioning of the prevailing contemporary answer began when I considered a Buddhist story. I am aware that the metaphysical worlds

of Buddhism and Christianity are in many ways far apart and that the question of 'knowing God' is a thorny one to deal with cross-culturally. Yet the story heightened my interest. The raging question in Mahayana Buddhist circles in the early part of the common era was whether women could obtain buddhahood. Did their femaleness exclude them from the possibility? The conservative camp argued that women could not master the subtle arts of perception necessary for that attainment. The progressive camp argued otherwise in a series of tales that bear the title, 'The Changing of the Female Body'. In them, female adepts astound learned *arhats* with their grasp of Buddhist notions like emptiness. Yet their detractors scoff and refuse to validate their attainments. Whereupon the women change from female to male before the astonished eyes of all. The texts underscore the Mahayana teaching that sex and gender are secondary characteristics, unimportant in the spiritual life. In Buddhism there is no permanent self. Femaleness or maleness is part of the ephemeral self that does not contribute to the attainment of *nirvana*.²

It occurred to me that the earliest Christian communities seem to convey an analogous message. Further hindsight reflection revealed that the cumulative Christian tradition presents one with multivocal and paradoxical answers to the question, and provides an understanding of why contemporary affirmations are what they are.

In the earliest Christian communities, neither maleness nor femaleness seemed to equip one for sacred intimacy. The baptismal formula of the ancient Church – 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28) – made it clear that the distinctions which kept some people excluded from participation in the community were abolished with the coming of the promised one. In the nascent community the subordination of women to men was abolished, social roles that identified the genders shifted, and maleness and femaleness were neither necessary for nor barriers to intimacy with God.

The second-century passion narrative of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas pushed this point to its logical conclusion. Faced with being offered to the beasts should they accept baptism, a band of martyrs, led by two women, elect to go triumphantly to their deaths. The heroines of the narrative personified all that the prevailing culture saw as unfit to know God. They were female, one a young Roman matron with a baby at the breast, the other a pregnant slave. Linked to the body and to the transitory created world through childbearing, legally subordinate to

the male heads of their households, considered less intrinsically spiritual, these women nonetheless had visions, dreamed dreams, prophesied, and proceeded with joy to the second bloody baptism which they believed to be the portal to resurrected life. The 'leap-frogging of the grave' that the exultant martyrs practised was also a 'leap-frogging' of the gendered body, in the sense that neither women nor men were defined as such in their relationship with divinity.³

The radical egalitarian community of the early persecuted Church did not continue as a social reality long, but it persisted as a spiritual reality for many centuries. Martyrdom was replaced by the 'white martyrdom' of the ascetic life. As with its bloody counterpart, the ascetic life was in some ways a very bodily experience, despite the fact that it attempted to overcome the natural demands of the body. But it was not a sexually differentiated life. Women and men alike became followers of Christ, consecrated themselves to virginity, practised sexual continence and lived, as they said, like the angels.⁴

The institutionalized ascetic life of monasticism became the image of what human beings in the promised kingdom could hope for. Gone were the male and female distinctions, both the social inequities and the presumably differing capacities of man and woman; gone too were the pain and burdens of childbearing, and the supposed animality of sexual passion. Instead, the rational appetites ruled supreme and the intellect was freed to pursue its ascent to God. Being man or woman, at least in theory, was peripheral to the task of becoming more clearly the image and likeness of God in whom humanity was created.

Over the centuries, the ways Christians named God and described the experience of knowing God evolved. The language of human relationship and desire, as well as the language of human reproduction, became prominent in medieval Christianity. Expressions of the passionate love of bride and bridegroom, of gestation, birth and lactation – all these are derived from sexual, gendered embodiment. As a growing appreciation for the *humanity* as well as the divinity of Christ emerged from the eleventh century on, so too medieval Christians explored the God-experience with the language of the body. But theirs was primarily a metaphorical language. Bernard of Clairvaux rhapsodically related his sense of divine presence using the erotic texts of the Song of Songs. Gueric of Igny homilized on the gestation of Christ in the human soul, admonishing his listeners to be careful lest they harm the foetal Christ-life growing within. Catherine of Siena nursed at the wounds of the God-man from which the breast-blood flowed in life-sustaining abundance.

Language drawn from human sexual identity abounded. Yet it was articulated primarily within the context of that eschatological, asexual, ungendered life of the angels. Women mystics might know God through the language of birth, but this was not because they had actually given birth. Men used the same birthing language to describe their God-experiences. When medieval monastic males spoke of passionate union with God, they saw themselves, not as exercising agency as partners in the relationship, but as the female of the pair. They were, as were women, the recipients of God's passionate embrace. Like the Virgin Mary, they were earthly vessels into which divine agency flowed. All creation was imaged as the receptive female in which God, as male potency, invested his spirit-seed in order to generate new, spiritual life. The use of language derived from male and female embodiment was rampant in the medieval Church, yet it was primarily a metaphorical language.

As for the actual experience of being female or male and its relationship to knowing God, the story was quite different. Biological maleness, despite the radical disclaimers of the early Christian community, was often perceived as an advantage in knowing God. The virtue, intellectual superiority and strength of character men were presumed to possess were seen as enabling them to apprehend God. Women's potential for intimacy with the divine was viewed less positively. By nature weak, suggestible, not possessed of the strength of character necessary for spiritual realization, women were only great God-knowers when they emphatically overcame their biological destinies. The functions of the body, especially the female body, were deeply suspect, and certainly regarded as having nothing positive to do with the apprehension of God.

Gradually the Church came to be more favourable toward the body in the sense that marriage and family life and the sexual processes associated with them were conditionally affirmed. Biological motherhood, for instance, moved gradually over the centuries from first being an obstacle to acknowledged holiness, to a surmountable barrier, and then finally became a possible arena in which one's sanctity might be realized. This gave rise to new answers to the question of male and female knowledge of God.⁵

Although the shift, albeit not spelt out, had begun much earlier, it was during the period of the Protestant and Catholic reforms that the Christian community came to articulate clearly a spirituality for women that was based on their biological capacity for childbearing. Particularly in Protestant circles, where any spiritual vocation other

than the ordinary path of householder and citizen was suspect, the domestic sphere became the only one in which women could pursue Christian righteousness. In the eyes of most of the magisterial Reformers, women were by nature (and thus by God's design) created primarily for childbearing. Their very embodiment as women, equipped with womb and breasts, signalled that their spiritual destinies could be realized only in the domestic sphere. Their presumed weakness of character, and the correspondingly presumed strength of male character, led naturally to the male headship of the family. Male and female were thus destined for specific social roles and could know God only by playing out those roles. One knew God in the ordinary and distinctively embodied roles in which one was engaged in society.

The Catholic Reform world still held out the possibility of a superior way of knowing God that required one to 'leap-frog' the body. This way was open to men and women as long as they transcended their natural sexual and socially gendered identities. However, a spiritual path of male and female embodiment began to develop for laypersons with families, living 'in the world'. Perhaps the most famous manual for such Christians was Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the devout life*, penned at the turn of the seventeenth century. Written primarily, but not exclusively, for non-cloistered women seeking to pursue a life of serious devotion in the midst of their familial duties, the *Introduction* assumed that knowing God is a matter of fidelity to one's 'state in life', and that that state was determined in great part by one's male or female embodiment.⁶

Up to this point I had discovered that the tradition had answered the question, 'Do men and women know God differently because of their embodiment?', in two main ways. Either the gendered body was seen to be irrelevant to spiritual matters, or, if sexual difference did matter, one sex (generally the male) was intrinsically more suited to the spiritual quest. A third alternative began to emerge clearly in the wake of the Reforms. The Quakers, or Society of Friends posited that men and women were equal in their spiritual capacities. No leap-frogging of the body was necessary, in the sense that Friends embraced marriage and family as the normal way of Christian life. Yet the call of the Spirit was not different for men and women, and a sexually differentiated life was no hindrance to hearing that call.⁷ If we turn our attention to American Christianity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we see all of the previous models existing side by side. Traditional Catholic religious life in both its apostolic and monastic modes expressed the 'truth' that men and women do not know God differently

when they transcend their biologically and socially differentiated identities. The magisterial Protestant model, which was adopted almost wholesale in the socially mobile immigrant Catholic layworld, championed differing spiritualities for women and men. In the emergent 'cult of true womanhood', women emerged as the more intrinsically spiritual gender: the wife-mother in her domestic haven nurtured the souls and bodies of her offspring, practised Christian virtue and provided a safe haven of spiritual calm for her husband. The alternative egalitarian approach articulated by the Quakers, supported by the thought world of the Enlightenment which challenged the divine origin of social institutions, became more widespread. This perspective held that equality – of race, class and gender – should be realized not only in some eschatological future, but should also be incarnated in the community of believers and from there enter society. Thus Quakers, especially Quaker women, were at the forefront of all major American reform movements: the abolition of slavery, temperance and women's suffrage. In this way radical, egalitarian thinking entered the mainstream of American social life early. It has since become an almost normative perspective and shapes the way many of us think about men and women and God.

The question of knowing God

The issues that this survey of the Christian past raised for me were several. Is it simply the case that in the past we have given inadequate attention to differing ways of knowing God? Is the problem that literate, European, male experience has been deemed representatively human to the exclusion of experience that is female, non-European etc.? I want to say yes. But I want to qualify the yes. So I return to 'The Changing of the Female Body' stories of Buddhism and to their parallels in early Christianity. Here we have counter-claims, not only that knowing God is a genderless undertaking, but that embodiment itself has little to do with knowing God. I call to mind as well the contemporary expression of our awareness that all knowledge of God is analogical and metaphorical.

This idea that human knowledge of God is limited is, of course, not new. At all stages in Christian development the spiritual tradition says as much, without the corresponding contemporary interest in the variety of equally valid ways of embodied knowing. Yet the tradition also posits that we can achieve intimacy with God as much by unknowing as by knowing, that there is a way of divine darkness, a *via negativa*, a path of loving, that provides us with an experiential, still incomplete, yet

finally more 'accurate' kind of knowledge than that which can be grasped either by the mind or through the avenue of sensory data.

While we are vehement today about exploring varied ways of knowing, we claim that God is only known in this fashion by analogy, and then we leave it at that. We echo the traditional caveat, yet do not posit that there is a mode of divine intimacy that pushes us beyond knowing into unknowing – the '*nada*' of John of the Cross, the 'cloud' of the author of *The cloud of unknowing*, or the 'Godhead beyond God' of Meister Eckhart. This unknowing is, in the literature of Christian mysticism, a profound sort of ecstatic love that takes one beyond all that is ordinarily apprehendable. This unknowing is more like the desiring, seeking and yearning of love than the clarity of rational knowledge or directness of sense experience. It strips one of all the particularity and diversity of the human condition.

Does this 'apophatic' tradition have anything to contribute to our query about gendered and embodied knowledge of God? I think so. Yet I have two cautionary observations. First, the apophatic tradition has its roots in a Neoplatonic thought world that conceptualizes divine reality as the One from which all created multiplicity comes. Knowledge derived from such created sources, while valuable, is insufficient when it comes to experiencing God. Does this ancient tradition simply lead us into an unacceptable philosophical impasse by assuming a dualism between body and spirit? Second, one current, compelling debate in the academic study of mysticism would question as epistemologically impossible any sort of direct, unmediated apprehension of the divine that is not shaped in some way by the confines of thought and language.⁸ While both of these cautions condition my query, still the traditional claim, that the ecstatic unknowing, the abyss of divine darkness, is a part of our 'knowing' of God, is compelling.

What the apophatic tradition does suggest, and this may be a significant way in which the past can illuminate the present, is that as human beings and God-seekers we are challenged both to know the vast diversity and multiplicity of what is, and to unlearn all that we know. We are drawn, by the sheer complexity of being, into mystery. We are drawn by our paradoxical capacity for imagining the unimaginable, somehow to transcend what we as embodied persons can know. It is love, not only as physical pleasure, solicitous attachment, romantic ardour or wide-reaching responsibility for human welfare, that is operative here. The love suggested here is that wide, painful, joyous opening of the person to hold within him- or herself the paradoxes that cannot otherwise be borne. When categories and constructs are confounded, when

multiple interpretations collide, when meaning fails and we can do no more than wait in silence, it is then that we are initiated into the love that begins the process of unknowing. This is emphatically part of knowing God.

Is this apophatic experience gendered? Is this loving unknowing the same for men and women? Is the embodied language of desire an apt language with which to attempt to speak of this distinctive type of knowledge? Has the Christian tradition framed this entry into the divine darkness in terms exclusively derived from either men's or women's embodiment? Does the Song of Songs, which provides scriptural metaphors for this kind of self-transcending excursion into divine desire, present a gender-biased portrait of human sexuality? I know of no studies which address these issues. They remain for me questions. What intrigues me is the idea that while particular embodied experience, including the experience of gender, does clearly shape our knowledge of God, it may be possible to speak of a kind of God-knowledge which begins to unravel all that we know, which can hear the silence beneath our varied voices, and through which, while respecting our differences, we can discover ourselves as one in our capacity for radical divine love.

NOTES

¹ The literature on the topics mentioned is enormous, but it might be helpful to enumerate a few modern 'classics' on male and female differences that have had an impact in the realm of spirituality. In moral development the names of Carol Gilligan and Nel Nodings loom large. Psychologist Gilligan's *In a different voice: psychological theory and women's development* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) and philosopher Nodings' *Caring: a feminine approach to ethics and moral education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) have set the agenda for the discussion. Also influential in the field of psychology has been Mary Belenky et al., *Women's ways of knowing: the development of self voice and mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986). Christian theology has been profoundly affected. The names of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Sandra Schneiders in scripture studies, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague and Elizabeth Johnson in systematics, define the theological field. In the field of spiritual literature a variety of titles seem to have made the rounds. Included might be Patrick Arnold, *Wildmen, warriors and kings: masculine spirituality and the Bible* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); James Nelson, *The intimate connection: male sexuality, male spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988); Robert Johnson, *He* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989); Joann Wolski Conn (ed), *Women's spirituality: resources for Christian development* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1986); Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, *The feminine face of God* (New York: Bantam, 1991); Maria Harris, *Dance of the Spirit: the seven steps of women's spirituality* (New York: Bantam, 1989).

² This text can be found in translation in *An anthology of sacred texts by and about women*, edited by Serenity Young (New York: Crossroad, 1993), pp 320–321. This theme is echoed in Gnostic Christian literature, especially the Gospel of Thomas, in which Jesus is reported as saying that Mary might be included in the inner circle if she becomes male. The scholarly debate about the actual meaning of the passage is heated.

³ The passion of Perpetua and Felicitas is translated in *Medieval women's visionary literature*, edited by Elizabeth A. Petroff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp 70–77. The phrase 'leap-frogging the grave' comes from historian Peter Brown. It is certainly possible at this point to stop and insist that such 'leap-frogging' is in fact gendered behaviour, that the very renunciation of bodiliness was implicit in a spirituality shaped by male perspectives found in the Greco-Roman world. I would, however, like to hold that critique in abeyance.

⁴ For a survey of two theologies – of subordination and equivalence – that dominate the Christian past and shape the changing views of female embodiment, see Rosemary Radford Ruether's article in *Women in world religions*, edited by Arvind Sharma (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1987). See also Karen Jo Torjesen, *When women were priests* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993).

⁵ For a history of motherhood, see Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The oldest vocation: Christian motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁶ Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the devout life*, translated by John K. Ryan (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1982).

⁷ On Quaker women in America, see Margaret Hope Bacon, *Mothers of feminism* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).

⁸ Cf Steven T. Katz (ed), *Mysticism and philosophical analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), and *Mysticism and religious traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).