

# GOD AND THE FEMININE

By JOHN MACQUARRIE

**O**F THE MANY social changes that have been going on in the past few decades, one of the most far-reaching has been the so-called sexual revolution. No doubt some aspects of this revolution are morally very questionable, but one that deserves to be widely welcomed is the move toward greater equality of the sexes which means in effect more freedom and dignity for women.

In the new situation, christian theologians must look again at the Church's teaching on sexuality in general and on the place of women in particular. There are contradictory interpretations of the influence of christian teaching in the past. On the one hand, it is complained that theology has been hostile to the cause of women's liberation. In the creation, Eve is subordinate to Adam and the proximate cause of his fall; in the picture of society presented in the Old Testament, there is a heavy patriarchal emphasis; and even the most influential of New Testament teachers, Paul, seems to regard women as, so to speak, second-class citizens; above all, it is claimed, the teaching about God in both the Old and New Testaments represents him in exclusively masculine terms — he is Father, King, Judge and even when he reaches out to men in his loving-kindness, he comes as Son. On the other hand, it has been pointed out that Jesus numbered women among his disciples and apparently valued them so highly that he made one of them the first witness of his resurrection; that Paul teaches that there is in Christ Jesus no distinction between male and female; that in opposition to paganism, christianity taught a new understanding of sex which ruled out the possibility of regarding women as mere sex objects; and that in the cult of the blessed Virgin Mary and then in the respect shown for virginity as a distinct form of the christian life, christianity was instrumental in raising the whole status of women in society, giving them a dignity of their own, apart from the traditional roles of wife and mother.

The evidence is, in fact, ambiguous. Perhaps one has to discriminate more closely between sociological and theological factors in christian teaching, for both are operative at any given time. Sociologically, a religious institution tends to reflect the traditional *mores* and usually exercises a conservative influence. Theologically, however, it may be introducing new and quite revolutionary ideas, without at the time

being fully aware of the implications of these ideas. Thus it could be argued that Paul's insistence that women stay in the background reflects the social customs of his time, and perhaps christian women had no other possible way of living and serving their Lord, given these conditions; but Paul's own words about the end of sex-discrimination in Christ already contradicted the system to which he was accustomed, though he himself may not have realized the full extent of the challenge offered to society by his own theology.

But even if one were to allow this kind of argument in the case of Paul, the main problem would still remain. For the main problem is this: the judeo-christian tradition presents us with a thoroughly masculine Deity, and by its apparent exclusion of the feminine, women are somehow further removed from God than men. To be sure, this too is partially to be explained in sociological or cultural terms. Hebrew monotheism emerged through its struggle with the canaanite fertility cults. These cults recognized both gods and goddesses, and sexual intercourse might well form part of the religious rituals, as in many ancient cults. But this certainly did not bring dignity to women or to sexuality in general. Perhaps the new prophetic and ethical religion of the Hebrews could only be born through the rigorous extrusion of goddesses and priestesses, and this might even lead to a better appreciation of sexuality and a higher place for women in the long run, for it must be remembered that religious reformations seem to take place only through grossly exaggerated and one-sided movements, and that the necessary corrections come later. Protestants are still correcting the exaggerations of the Reformation of the sixteenth century, though unfortunately Roman Catholics seem now to have embarked on a repetition of many of the old protestant excesses! In any case, much has happened since the days of the hebrew prophets. Not least, the exalted role assigned to Mary in the New Testament has helped to correct the heavy masculine emphasis in the concept of God. But the time has perhaps come to look at the question in a more radical way.

Before we come directly to the theological problem, it will be helpful first to consider in somewhat more detail the phenomenon of sexuality and the difference between the sexes. In the first instance, of course, that difference is a physical one, and it is a difference which human beings share with most animals and even plants. Sex in this aspect is a biological phenomenon, and a very important and valuable one. But in the case of human beings, sexuality has become something far wider than a biological phenomenon. It is an eminent biologist, J. Z. Young,

who has written: 'The full sexual relationship includes much more than the particular physical reactions'.<sup>1</sup> Sexuality enters very deeply into the psychology and personality of every human being — more deeply, perhaps, than most of us realize. To be sure, sexual differences are founded on physical differences — the shape of the body, the differences in organs, the physiological rhythms, the hormone systems, the differing roles in intercourse and reproduction. These are fundamental. But they are so fundamental that they give rise to very deep mental, personal and spiritual differences.

Sometimes this is denied, especially by ardent feminists who claim that the only basic difference between men and women is the biological one, and that intellectually and spiritually there are no basic differences. The differences that we expect — for instance, passivity on the part of women — are due to centuries of cultural conditioning, in short, of oppression, and if these cultural hindrances to the development of women were removed, then the supposed psychological differences between men and women would disappear. There is, of course, some truth in this point of view. First in wartime and then in peacetime, women have taken over jobs that were once reserved to men, and have shown that they have all the psychological resources, both intellectual and emotional, for performing these jobs. Nevertheless, intellectual and emotional differences remain, and it is an oversimplification to say it is all due to cultural and sociological factors that we have come to think of distinct masculine and feminine personalities. One meets in the writings of Colette women who were consciously striving to abolish the difference between themselves and men, and who therefore dressed like men, talked like men, followed supposedly masculine pursuits and even took female lovers. One gets the impression more of a fundamental insecurity than of the true dignity of woman. Egalitarianism in its more naïve forms conceals many fallacies and often militates against true human worth.

What the feminists rightly protest against is the idea that the difference between the sexes is to be understood in terms of superiority and inferiority. Many cultures undoubtedly have encouraged the idea that only the male of the species is fully a human being, and that women are somehow second-class human beings or even incomplete men. It should not be supposed that this idea that women are incomplete human beings is an idea entertained only in primitive societies or among the uneducated in our own time. It has been assiduously propagated by one

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<sup>1</sup> Young, J. Z.: *An Introduction to the Study of Man* (London, 1971), p 186.

of the most influential students of the human mind in recent times, namely, Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, the mentality of the two sexes is very different indeed. As far as the woman is concerned, her whole emotional and personal development is determined by her discovery that she lacks the sexual organ that is so prominent in the male — by the phenomenon that he called 'penis-envy'. To quote his own words: 'Of little girls we know that they feel themselves heavily handicapped by the absence of a large visible penis and envy the boy's possession of it'.<sup>2</sup> Beginning from this point, Freud is driven to give a mainly negative account of feminine psychology and personality. The woman is determined by envy and the frustrating desire to be a man, and therefore also by feelings of inferiority and a latent masochism. In spite of all Freud wrote about sex, I do not believe he had much understanding of women. He was correct in thinking that there is a profound psychological difference between the sexes, but wrong in his fundamental conception of woman as a deficient human being.

Ann Ulanov is on much surer ground when, although recognizing the very diverse styles of masculine and feminine personality, she argues that both together constitute a complete humanity, so that either of them in isolation would be deficient. She writes:

The feminine is half of human wholeness, an essential part of it. . . .  
Masculine and feminine elements exist only in relation to each other and complement rather than fight each other.<sup>3</sup>

The same writer lays considerable stress on the tendency to embrace things and persons in their wholeness as typical of the feminine style of mentality. The masculine mind is analytical, critical, specialized, discursive; the feminine, by contrast, is aiming at completeness and is intuitive. Such contrasts, of course, are perhaps founded ultimately in the physical differences between the sexes. In this connection, one may mention the work of Erik Erikson. He observed that girls will use building blocks to construct interiors or enclosures in which there is peace and security. Boys on the other hand construct exterior scenes, projections, towers and the like. He saw this as reflecting the structure of their own bodies. But instead of following Freud's interpretation of the feminine mentality, Erikson gave it a positive valuation. He thinks

<sup>2</sup> Freud, S.: *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (London, 1949), p 267.

<sup>3</sup> Ulanov, Ann: *The Feminine* (Evanston, 1971), pp 156, 164.

it expresses a 'productive inner-bodily space' which is the complement of the outgoing masculine thrust.<sup>4</sup> To the witness of Ulanov and Erikson may be added that of R. S. Lee who, beginning from Freudian principles, reaches interesting conclusions about the differences in moral perception between men and women. Boys, he argues, because of the relation to the father, develop a strong superego and come to see morality in terms of rules and moral principles. Girls have a different relation to the father, and understand morality more in terms of ideals than authoritative rules. 'A woman is more practical and positive in her moral decisions than a man because they are personal rather than abstract, and her judgments are intuitive rather than analytical'.<sup>5</sup>

So the contours of the differences emerge fairly clearly, and are seen to be complementary. Certainly neither is superior to the other, and a complete humanity demands both.

But now we must come to the all-important insight of C. J. Jung that the masculine and feminine types of personality are not found in isolation, the masculine in men and the feminine in women, but that every human being, whether man or woman, has both masculine and feminine elements in his or her personality. To be sure, the man tends to be more masculine than feminine, and the woman to be more feminine than masculine, but every man has his *Anima*, that part of his psyche which is the feminine complement of the dominant masculine part, and every woman has her *Animus*, the masculine elements in her psyche which complement the dominant feminine part.

These brief reflections on human sexuality and the place of the feminine have now led us to a point where we see how complex and difficult this whole matter is. We have seen that the difference between the masculine and the feminine is a real one, that it has nothing to do with questions of superiority and inferiority, but rather with the completeness of personal human life which has to be built out of diverse elements that will sometimes be in tension. We have seen further that it is possible to characterize the feminine in broad strokes — it is a type of mentality responsive rather than initiating, concerned with the whole, with the inward, with the ideal, with what can be intuited rather than deduced, while the masculine style is different at each point. But finally we note that every balanced human being is constituted by

<sup>4</sup> Erikson, E.: 'Inner and Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood', in *The Woman in America*, ed. R. J. Lifton (Boston, 1965). Quoted by A. Ulanov, *op. cit.*, p 151.

<sup>5</sup> Lee, R. S.: 'Human Nature and the Fall: A Psychological View', in *Man, Fallen and Free*, ed. E. Kemp (London, 1969), p 54.

both masculine and feminine elements, and that it would be a mere caricature or stereotype to suppose that in every woman one finds exclusively the typically feminine characteristics.

To think for a moment of our Lady, as the pattern of womanhood for Christians, we certainly note in her the typical feminine characteristics. She responds to the initiating activity of God: 'Be it unto me according to thy word'. She has great inward depth: 'She pondered all these things in her heart'. She has the feminine capacity for patient endurance of pain. But there is another side, and it is this other side that the Pope has brought out in his Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, no doubt in response to the present drive to get away from feminine stereotypes. Thus the Pope has said:

The modern woman will appreciate that Mary's choice of the state of virginity . . . was not a rejection of any of the values of the married state but a courageous choice which she made in order to consecrate herself totally to the love of God. The modern woman will note with pleasant surprise that Mary of Nazareth . . . was far from being a timidly submissive woman; on the contrary, she was a woman who did not hesitate to proclaim that God vindicates the humble and oppressed, and removes the powerful people of this world from their privileged positions.<sup>6</sup>

Mary then did not conform to any stereotype and she sometimes showed characteristics that we would normally call masculine, yet she is perfectly woman and perfectly feminine. A different case is presented by the sisters of Bethany. This other Mary is the contemplative, the woman of inward space. Martha is the activist, but both are women.

It is now time for us to return to the question of God and of what place, if any, sexuality and femininity can have in our understanding of God. Christian theologians for the most part have believed that the infinite is reflected in the finite, so that whatever is good and affirmative in the created order dimly mirrors something in God himself, though admittedly that something in God may so transcend what we know in finite existence that there will be great difference as well as some measure of affinity. At times when sex was considered inherently sinful and the feminine was despised or feared, to talk of sexuality or femininity in God would have seemed to many pagan and unchristian if not utterly blasphemous. But if one does set a high value on sexuality, and if one acknowledges, as we have seen reason to do, that the feminine

<sup>6</sup> *To Honour Mary* (Catholic Truth Society, 1974), pp 62-63.

is an essential and in no way inferior pole in the duality of sex, then presumably whatever is good and affirmative in sexuality and femininity is present in an eminent way in God. To be sure, God has no sex in the ordinary sense of the word, though we habitually use masculine pronouns to refer to him. He transcends sex, but he does so not by sheerly excluding sexuality but by including in an eminent way whatever is of value in it.

We confine ourselves to the two creation stories in Genesis, but these alone yield a wealth of material.

I have already mentioned that in the older of these stories there are some elements that seem to suggest the inferiority of the woman — she is created subsequently to Adam, she is designated his helpmeet, she is the first to fall. But the main point of the story is different. That main point is that Adam is an incomplete being until the creation of Eve. This is the story-teller's way of saying that sociality is essential to personality, that, in the language of Martin Buber, there is no 'I' without a 'Thou'. And, as Karl Barth has pointed out, according to this story, it is sexuality that is 'the basic form of all association and fellowship which is the essence of humanity'.<sup>7</sup> Why sexuality? I should say myself that it is because the sexual relation is the most intimate act of mutual self-giving and communion possible for two human beings. Indeed, can we still speak of 'two'? Or have they become in a sense a new whole — 'one flesh' in the biblical language? Again the physical side reinforces the point. Each human being has a complete respiratory system, cardiovascular system, nervous system, digestive system and so on — but he or she has only half of a genital system, and so each is incomplete without the other. It will be noted, too, that the first words which Adam speaks, he addresses to the woman. Language, which many see as that which makes the human being human, and which again is basic to human association and fellowship, is evoked from Adam by Eve in the meeting with her. Incidentally, language itself is a good illustration of the way in which sexuality pervades human life and enters deeply into our perception of the world. For gender is an ancient and almost universal characteristic of language, and is evidence of the way in which our ancestors saw the natural objects and forces around them as endowed with sexuality.

It is, however, in the later and more sophisticated story of the creation that we begin to see how some of these ideas apply to God. As the climax of his great creative work, God says: 'Let us make man in our

<sup>7</sup> Barth, K.: *Church Dogmatics*, III/1 (Edinburgh, 1958), p 288.

own image, after our likeness. . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them'. In this version, man and woman are created simultaneously, and thus their equality and co-essentiality to humanity are recognized. But what is more important is that both are in the image of God. That image needs both masculinity and femininity to reflect it.

Commentators have often discussed the fact that the verb used by God, 'Let us make . . .' is in the plural. If association and fellowship are essential to personal being, and if God is the supreme person, then there must be diversity or distinctions within God, there must be sociality in God. Many centuries after Genesis was written, christian theologians worked out the doctrine of the Trinity that God is perfectly one, and yet he is self-related and within the unity are the three distinct modes of being that we call Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Is there any better analogy we can find for the understanding, so far as we can understand, of the mystery of the Three-in-One than the earthly mystery of christian marriage — and, in a sense, this too is a Trinity, for in sacramental marriage God is the ever-present third party in the love that unites husband and wife. We have seen that in this sexual relation both are distinct and yet one flesh, and this is surely our best clue to understanding what theologians have meant by the *perichoresis* or *circumincessio* of the divine persons of the Trinity, that is to say, their mutual interpenetration and reciprocity.

Such reciprocity clearly implies that there are in God elements analogous to the feminine as well as to the masculine. Sometimes attempts have been made to associate these feminine elements with a particular person of the Trinity, namely, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's brooding upon the creation suggests the contemplative inner space of femininity, the Spirit's travail amid the sighs of creation suggests the feminine work of bringing to birth through patient endurance. But just as in a human marriage there are frequent exchanges of roles and each partner evinces both masculine and feminine characteristics, so the analogues of these characteristics belong to all the divine modes of being.

There is a further point that is worth taking up. The union of husband and wife is not a closed union — it opens out into the wider community of the family. In the sexual union, man and woman under God become procreators, they are charged with the solemn and joyful task of creating community. Incidentally, we must never lose sight of the essential connection between sexuality and reproduction, though of course one cannot draw from this the conclusion that every sexual act must be



aimed at reproduction. Human procreation is a reflection of God's own creativity. God was not content, so to speak, to stay within himself, and his creation is the generous overflow of his love. But when he created in love, he also made himself vulnerable to his creation, for there is no love without vulnerability. In spite of the traditional doctrine of the impassibility of God, many theologians today believe that they must speak of some reciprocity in God's relation with his world, and even that they must speak of God suffering in and with his creatures. But as soon as one begins to speak in this way, again one is recognizing that in some respects the life of God is to be thought of as analogous to what we call the feminine as well as the masculine.

A deeper understanding and appreciation of the feminine in God will surely be an enrichment of our relation to God. And, as has already happened in the past, this development will be greatly advanced by the place that we give in devotion and in theology to the handmaid of the Lord, the blessed Virgin Mary.