

WOMEN AND THEOLOGY: SINGING OF GOD IN AN ALIEN LAND

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IT SOMETIMES HAPPENS that long forgotten experiences and memories find their way into our consciousness when the feelings that evoked them rise up again in new circumstances and we have the distinct awareness that somehow or other we 'have been here before'. An experience such as this can be clarifying and mystifying at one and the same time, or so it was for me, as a childhood memory came vividly before my mind this last year and named a present feeling that I was either unable or unwilling to articulate. The emotion was one of fear and impending loss that left me somehow feeling outside of myself. The event in my childhood occurred when I was four or five perhaps, old enough to know but little enough to have to climb on to the bathtub and then to the side of the large basin in order to see myself in the mirror. It was a warm day in spring as I remember the window being open, feeling a fresh breeze which gently blew the curtains and noticing the sun on the uppermost branches of the trees in the backyard. But the general warmth and sensualness of the experience gave way to a feeling that seemed to clutch at my heart. I recall looking at myself intently in the mirror and asking or thinking from some place deep inside, 'What if there is no God?' Where the question came from totally escapes me and I have no recollection of any event or experience that might give it meaning. Yet I can distinctly remember the fear and uneasiness that surrounded it.

What brought back that childhood memory and the feeling it engendered was an experience that uncovered the same clutching fear and sense of loss. The difference was that now I could name it and knew from whence it came. For some years I had been reading and studying the developing literature of christian feminist scholars. In the beginning it was with intellectual curiosity, coupled with a growing conviction that was forming in my mind but had not yet touched deep religious levels in terms of my relationship with God. While I was claiming the insights of feminist theology and bringing them into my teaching, my own relationship to God had not fundamentally changed nor been challenged. I still moved,

lived, and prayed in the warmth and comfort of what I felt to be and had experienced as the one anchorhold to which I fully subscribed, in a theological world which had shifted dramatically. What eluded my conscious awareness was the realization that an internal change had taken place to which I had not attended. Then one day, the time and place of which I cannot say, like the four or five-year old of decades past, I looked at myself intently but now in the mirror of my spirit, and a question rose up which gripped my heart with the fear and sense of loss I had known once before. The God I had related to with such assurance and confidence no longer lifted my heart in joy and in loving surrender. Instead, I felt an incredible sadness and fear, an empty space in which my unuttered question searched the void with a frightened inarticulate cry—'Who and where is God for me now?' The symbols and names of God in and with which I had prayed had alien sounds and I was in a real way looking at an image of myself that was only a reflection. But now, unlike the child who looks in the mirror and then quickly forgets, I have set about going to the end of my question.

It is my belief that every woman who has seriously grappled with feminist theology and considered her own value and experience as a woman has encountered a similar experience. The circumstances may vary greatly but the consciously owned reality of having to relate to a God who has been consistently named and symbolized in masculine terms in a Church which has subordinated women and devalued their gifts, has provoked a crisis whose resolution has spawned a growing volume of literature which attests to a renaming of God arising from a new experience. Much of this literary output has come from biblical scholars, systematic and moral theologians, christian historians, psychologists, and educational theorists. The academic training of these women has equipped them with the skills required not only to challenge the theological structures of a classical disembodied spirituality which found its way into the articulations of dogma and magisterial teaching, but to offer new perspectives and insights which can hopefully lead to creative and alternative methodologies. Important and indispensable as such scholarship continues to be, the source of its power and vitality is even more significant. Expressed in poetry and music, in painting and in the art of story-telling, women have begun to share the richness and pain of their experience and found within it the creative, nourishing, numinous, feminine power of God. Crossing barriers of race, culture, social and economic backgrounds, this shared experience is uncovering a well-spring of creative and liberating forces whose energies have an explosion

capacity that can release the sterile and technocratic numbness that has blunted our feeling responses and our hope of renewing the face of our earth.

For me, such sharing of experience is not intended to produce a separatist movement nor to create a female God who can replace and unseat the male deity of patriarchy. It is rather, to recover, to reclaim, and to rename the God who is not any *One* or any *Thing* but who is the source and the reality of all persons and all things. It is the God of the hebrew scriptures who is not primarily a warrior and a potentate, but the 'I Am' who identified with a suffering enslaved people, the God who covers the earth like a mist, who encircles the vault of the sky, walks the bottom of the deeps, and has taken root in the people of the earth.¹ It is the relational God whose covenanted love for the people links them irrevocably to one another and to the land, and whose protective love is likened to the great mother eagle who hovers over her young and swoops under them lest they fall.² It is the love of God of Jesus whose kingdom is likened to a bakerwoman, to the generous heart of a poor widow, and to a woman's diligent search for a lost coin.³ It is the God whom Jesus experienced as a tender parent, caring, forgiving, compassionate and merciful. A God whose beauty is found in the flowers of the field, in the innocence of little children, the tender ministry of one sinful woman, and the extravagant outpouring of costly ointment in anointing from another. It is the God whose voice is heard in all the calls to reverence our earth through ecological care, in the pleas of caring peoples who seek our assistance for the starving, the elderly, abused and orphaned children, the homeless and the unemployed. It is the God who walks with the argentinian women of the Plaza de Mayo who make silent powerful pleas for disappeared husbands and sons. And . . . it is the God whose ever-renewing life and love pushes the pussy willow into the March sun from the bare branches outside my window, promising another spring.

While this God is not totally absent from academic theology, the language of dogmatic theses and scientific biblical exegesis is nevertheless empty of emotion and depth of feeling. To bring personal experience into such objective theologizing is to muddy its waters and to insert a dimension of life that has no place in the rational, logical compendium of faith, which admits no place for doubt nor allows it to enter personal consciousness. Sharp distinctions between systematic and pastoral theology in academic institutions make this all too clear. In some schools of higher learning doctoral students are not allowed to take pastoral courses because they are not thought to be 'academic'. In other instances,

asking students to relate their learning to experience is looked upon as a dangerous encroachment into the sphere of the private and the personal.

None of this is surprising if we reflect that the Church's suspicion of human experience as a locus of God's revelation has only been lifted in recent decades. Disembodied theology was actualized in disembodied spirituality, where it was detached and separated from the core of personal experience and alienated from nature, from the body, and from the feminine which was its symbolic expression. To reclaim human experience as the place of God's revealing love and presence then is to reclaim the feminine principle in God and in all living things. It is to be attuned to the sacredness of all life and to be mindful of the movement of the Spirit in the processes of the earth we have been given to tend and to transform, rather than to conquer, to control and to destroy.

The frontiers of theology today seek articulation in a process and methodology which is experiential, holistic, and creation-centered. By the frontiers of theology I mean those already existing and developing trends which are concerned with bringing the truths of faith to bear on the human problems of life: the peace movement, nuclear war and the arms race, environmental pollution, economic and political oppression, the right to life and quality of life, psychological and physical violence, the rights of minorities and women, to name just a few. Problems of life are ultimately relational, calling for nurture, reverence, networking, cooperation, care and compassion. As such they are opposed to competition, individualism, and self-determination that is often unmindful of communitarian goals. In the history of patriarchy and of modern western culture women have often been the prime bearers of the values pertaining to the preservation and the nurturing of relationships, and these values have been considered to be secondary to the linear arrow of progress that has fragmented society into a technological machine whose destructive powers are now capable of destroying all life on this planet. Christian women in such societies lived under a double indemnity, for Christianity, itself a hierarchically structured patriarchal society, had established a very definite position and role for women. As theology once more seeks to ground itself in reality and to be mindful that it is the People of God who are the primary subjects of doing theology today, the feminine symbol emerges with a new vitality and the hope for a renewed earth. If women have been the prime bearers of the feminine will they also have a unique difference to bring to a renewed theology?

I have already alluded earlier to the growth and development

of an emerging feminist theology that is the fruit of reflection on the experience of what it has been to be woman in a hierarchically structured male Church. It is not the purpose of this article to summarize nor to analyze the various contributions, positions or challenges that such scholarship offers to the theological enterprise, important as that may be. It is, rather, to offer the personal reflection of one woman in theological education with the hope that one more story shared will add to the web of still fragile threads which reach out to join yet another as we weave the tapestry of our lives with the hope that they will make a difference.

That women might indeed make a difference and offer a contribution to theological education was surely part of the vision of Mary Ward, in whose honour these essays are written. The fact that her insights into the potentialities of women, although initially welcomed by many churchmen, met ultimately with such opposition from the institutional Church are indication enough that such a possibility was feared and that any further initiatives should be checked. Convinced that if women could be free to develop their potential in the service of the Church great things might be done, she wrote:

There is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things, as we have seen by the example of many saints. And I hope to God it will be seen that woman in time to come will do much . . . As if we were in all things inferior to some other creature which I suppose to be man! . . . I would to God all men understood this verity, that women if they will may be perfect, and if they would not make us believe we can do nothing, and that we are but women, we might do great matters.⁴

The crux of opposition to Mary Ward was not so much that she envisioned a group of women who engaged in an apostolate which took them outside the cloister, but more specifically in her firm belief that if given education they would prove to have powers and capabilities not granted to them by the Church nor by society. The official Bull of suppression of her Institute, *Pastoralis Romani Pontificis*, signed by Urban VIII on 13 January 1631, includes in the condemnation the accusation that these women accepted works 'which men most experienced in the knowledge of sacred scripture understood with difficulty and not without great caution'.⁵

Ensuing centuries would change much in the condemnation of Mary Ward's efforts. Today we witness to the fact that the enrolment of women in theological schools is beginning to equal that of men, and that many academic posts in these same insti-

tutions are filled by women. In my own religious congregation, for example, I am one of nine other sisters who teach in a school of theology or seminary. Nevertheless, in spite of these gains and of this acceptance, an underlying fear and suspicion of female influence and power in mediating the Word of God through theological education still makes itself felt. Norms and guidelines for the education of seminarians from Rome and Bishops' Conferences are not without such veiled allusions.

Whether women do in fact bring something to theology that men do not is a debatable question. I believe that most women who are engaged in theological education would not hold that their capabilities are different because of any biological or innate ability. Yet what is of vast difference is the experience that women bring to the theological enterprise. Centuries of patriarchy and the exclusiveness of a male hierarchical Church have both disregarded and demeaned the gifts and values of women and given them virtually no place in consciously shaping the articulation of its belief system. Influenced by its judaic heritage, and in the early centuries of the Church by the dualism of neo-Platonists 'both women as people and the feminine aspects of life were increasingly pushed out of sight along with the other egalitarian norms of the new testament Church'.⁶ The richness and the pain of that past experience, and the contribution that it can make toward a theology that is holistic, creation-centered, and concerned with the humanization and divinization of our world, is only beginning to be felt. Moreover, as the foundations of theology continue to shift from philosophy to praxis and to strengthen their basis on experience as a locus of God's revelation, women in theological and ministerial schools will have much to offer in bringing the resources of faith to shed new light on contemporary experience and concerns.

As a professor of pastoral theology in an ecumenical consortium of theological schools in Toronto, Canada, my areas of teaching have been in ministry, spirituality, and more recently, feminist theology. My students have included men and women enrolled in various theological degree programmes as well as continuing education students who have come for a year's study and reflection on their ministerial experience. My teaching experience as a woman in this area of theology has been satisfying and challenging, though not without its periods of darkness and discomfort. For a number of years as the only woman on the faculty, the only non-cleric and the only non-Jesuit, I felt somewhat tangential to a long and very prestigious form of education that was for the most part highly academic and built on a long and venerable tradition that did not brook change easily. Moreover, pastoral theology did not

enjoy a high priority. It was not my task nor my intention to be an instrument of change nor innovation. I had come to this position primarily to teach continuing education students in a newly developed programme which I was subsequently to direct. I also offered courses to basic degree students in theology in the areas of ministry and spirituality.

My own teaching career had been interrupted by ten years of administration in my religious congregation as general superior. It was this decade of ministry, however, that proved to be my real theological education and enabled me to bring to teaching a unique experience of the emerging role of women in church service and the struggle that attended it in the period of renewal that followed the Vatican Council. I had had first-hand and intimate experience of what it meant to internalize the renewed theology of the Church and of its role in the modern world. The frustrating and often disheartening attempts to share that experience with vatican authorities was already drawing lines of sharp disagreement which were only to deepen as the years went on. The wider calls to ministry and increasing pastoral needs led women into service areas that made them more visible and problematic. The women's movement of the 1960s found its way into the Church with a growing insistence and the desire for fuller participation in the Church's life and mission. This experience forever changed my own life and the Church's teaching would now have to be integrated into the truth of its reality. In many ways this would influence my teaching and the way in which I would hear and be aware of the experience of students who entered my classes.

My own reflection and study of spirituality inclined me to believe that much of it in the past had been presented within the framework of values traditionally associated with men—individuation, separateness, and the quest for a glorious achievement. Images of ladders and scales of perfection, levels of detachment and stages of prayer to be achieved by set rules and formulas or feats of asceticism, held out a blueprint for arriving at a state of 'undivided' love of God. Human love was in some way in competition with love for God, and the achievement of building the Kingdom of God in terms of establishing or contributing to institutions for education, health care and evangelization were the hallmark of our zeal.

Most of the mystics (both men and women) who spoke of God in terms of light and darkness, water and cloud, father and mother, friend and spouse, were for the most part held beyond our reach as 'not the ordinary way' of seeking union with God and response to the calls of love. The path of the virtues, the methods of mental

prayer, the way of obedience to the law, the teaching magisterium of the Church, were safer and surer and could more easily be measured and tested.

As both men and women shared their experience in class discussion, it became more obvious that what for too long was a onesided sense of things was moving toward an integration with the feminine, nurturing, caring, relational elements in all living things, persons, and social structures in which women and men live. I found that many men found such sharing difficult and generally outside the ambience of their way of learning. Being formed and inculturated to arrive at full mature adulthood through growing individuation, separateness, and the achieving of their destiny and dream, they were nevertheless not without the hope that these qualities would ultimately lead to attachment and mutuality. Yet a number of researchers in this area note that very few men enjoy any intimacy with other men or even women for that matter. Daniel Levinson in his book, *The seasons of a man's life*, concludes from his interviews with a number of men that friendship was largely noticeable by its absence. 'As a tentative generalization we would say', he wrote, 'that close friendship with a man or woman is rarely expressed by american men . . . We need to understand why friendship is so rare, and what consequences this has for adult life'.⁷ Such lack of sharing on a feeling level causes men to be wary and mistrusting of knowledge that arises from such sources. A fourth-year theology student who resisted such an experience told me emphatically that this was the first time in four years that he had been asked to relate his theology to his personal experience and he was not about to do it now! He 'knew' his theology and what would be expected of him ministerially and it had nothing to do about reflection on his 'feelings' about it.

Women, on the other hand, found such sharing of experience to be easier. Their inculturation has fostered feelings of inequality and subservience, and while this situation is both deplored and denounced, it has in its own way been the source of empathy and resonance in the experience of ministry. Psychologist Mary Baker Miller has pointed out that the subordinate position of women has called forth a kind of strength and power that enables them to relate more existentially with both oppression and care.⁸ The fruits of a decade of research and interviews with women conducted by Carol Gilligan of the Harvard Graduate school of Education indicate that:

In response to the request to describe themselves, all of the women describe a relationship, depicting their identity in the connection of future mother, present wife, adopted child or past lover. Simi-

larly, the standard of moral judgment that informs this assessment of themselves is a standard of relationship, an ethic of nurturance, responsibility and care . . . measuring their strength in the activity of attachment, giving to helping out, being kind, not hurting.⁹

The movement to shift the foundation of theology from the proved thesis and arguments from authority to the reflection on those deep human experiences of life, and to discover in them a place where God is revealed, is the ambiance where men will begin to probe more deeply their own experience and where women will name and validate what has been true for them all along. And it will challenge men and women alike to bring the resources of faith to shed new light on contemporary experience and concerns.

My own experience as a woman theologian has grown and deepened by sharing the lives of my students and by the easy access I have had to the developing literature of feminist scholars. But it has also made me acutely conscious of my own personal struggle. As a teacher and administrator in a theological school, my efforts and energies have been caught up in the creation of courses, concerns with students, development and promotion of programmes, and the intellectual stimulation which, for all its seductiveness, can be suffocating as well. Time for personal reflection and the probing of one's own experience is frequently set aside or, more dangerously, caught up in an immediate self-consciousness easily confused with contemplation. The receiving and receptive sides are closed off and the core of one's own life is unheard and unattended to. As I began a sabbatical year last fall, a great and yawning space closed its circle about and above me. One evening I reflected on a poem of a contemporary woman writer and its message struck the familiar chord that unleashed the sounds that had been silent and inarticulate in myself.

I can tell you that solitude
Is not all exaltation, inner space
Where the soul breathes and work can be done.
Solitude exposes the nerve,
Raises up ghosts.
The past, never at rest, flows through it.¹⁰

Left to myself, I discovered that the questions I had dealt with so convincingly in classes and with colleagues rose up from nameless currents in my own spirit, and I had to climb down from the heady arguments of my mind to meet them in the turmoil of my heart. With all my insistence on the need to rename and reclaim

the feminine in God, and all my resistance to the masculine symbols and titles which made God a patriarch, a king, a warrior or a champion, I realized that my heart had found no homeland for my convictions. I was wandering in a desert land partly of my own making and partly born of an experience which I had owned but not internalized.

So I have set about the personal search that will allow me to open to the infinite flow of God and to God who is the infinite capacity in myself to receive infinity. This God, I sense, is not one who can be created into poverty, celibacy, obedience, social justice, the institutional Church . . . nor feminist theology. But the danger of making such idols remains a constant threat and a subtle temptation as well.

The terrain of the search, moreover, is not apart from the rich soil of the Church's tradition, but, for women who are less and less able to relate to God exclusively as Father, it requires a change in the existing paradigm in which this model has been accepted as the root metaphor. The scriptures, the writings of many of the church fathers, the mystics, and the simple faith experience of many men and women attest to the feminine in God. But the strong overlay of patriarchy and androcentric values have succeeded in an exclusive masculine naming of God in the Church's official teaching and in the choice of liturgical texts which surround its worship. Hymns and prayers and the celebration of Eucharist consistently call upon God as Father and Lord, and it is always a 'He' that we address in supplication, or whose mercy and compassion we invoke in Jesus's name. The male symbol has become the reality and has given men a role-model in the deity not afforded to women. To make a turn-about and use exclusively feminine language does not answer the question and would be to fall into the same limiting of God whose relational capacities are as pluriform as the infinite ways we can experience God's liberating love. But for women who have come to know and to experience God within the reality of their own lives, to have to pray in exclusively masculine language and imagery is alienating and even destructive of our capacity to be one with the God who is all. This is the pain and the paradox of my own search.

Critical feminist hermeneutics seeks to transform biblical and theological sciences and the judaic-christian heritage to show that sexism was not so from the beginning. But this will ultimately have to be a work that is not directed to scientific inquiry alone. Unless its labour allows and invites all women and men mutually to discover and experience their own dignity, freedom, self-affirmation and infinite capacity for God, then it will remain an

intellectual effort which will be debated and researched but not likely be a force for the renewing and transforming of our earth, which is the ultimate realization of the reigning of God.

If my own childhood question 'What if there is no God?' has changed to 'Who and where is God for me now?', the search for the answer will be partly in seeking to bond in solidarity with other women who ask this same question in other traditions, cultures and walks of life different from my own. Our common experience of patriarchy calls for shared channels of communication that reach beyond particular religious traditions and social situations, and which can offer a new perspective on the whole of reality. And it will be partly in seeking a continual dialogue with men who hopefully can hear that experience, as together we seek a greater liberation of western culture from the alienation which has set it over and against the feminine symbol, and the goodness of a creation which is gravely imperilled.

NOTES

¹ Cf Exod 3,7-16, Sir 24,1-30.

² Cf Exod 19,3-8, Deut 32,11.

³ Cf Mt 13,33; Mk 13,41-44; Lk 15,8-10.

⁴ O'Connor, M. M. Margarita: *That incomparable woman* (Montreal, 1962), p 50.

⁵ Cain, James R.: 'Cloister and the apostolate of religious women', *Review for Religious*, vol 27, 1968, p 667.

⁶ Haughton, Rosemary: *There is hope for a tree: a study-paper on the emerging Church*, June 1980, p 14.

⁷ Levinson, Daniel: *The seasons of a man's life* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p 335.

⁸ Cf Miller, Mary Baker: *Toward a new psychology of women* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1977).

⁹ Gillegan, Carol: *In a different voice* (Harvard University Press, 1981), p 159.

¹⁰ 'Gestalt at Sixty' in *Selected poems of May Sarton*, (W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 1978), p 63.