

FEMININE-MASCULINE THEOLOGY

MICHAEL NOVAK

Carol Christ and Emma Trout recently described their experience at prayer, and the alienation they have felt in praying to a "male" God. They force me to examine my own experience.

Somewhere along the line, during my college years, someone or some book (perhaps it was Martin D'Arcy's *animus* and *anima* in *The Mind and Heart of Love*) suggested that at prayer men should strive to release and to develop in themselves the "feminine" side of their nature, and women the "masculine."

The use of "masculine" and "feminine" as types dividing human qualities was unfortunate in ancient and medieval days. It is even more painful today. Such terms force humans to "specialize," to curb their own spontaneous instincts to one side of the cultural spectrum. But in ancient and medieval times, these terms were sometimes used descriptively. Normatively, some voices and some motifs encouraged humans not to be bound by them.

The associations with "feminine" were qualities important for every human, but believed to come easier to women: contemplation, abandonment into God's hands, silence, patience, gentleness.

The associations with "masculine" were qualities important for every human, but believed to be socially more reinforced for men: decisiveness, will, action, courage.

Examples of how these qualities could cross over were St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. *He* seemed the silent, contemplative, gentle one. She seemed the human of courage, action, resolution and—her favorite word—*determinação*. She the organizer, he the poet.

I can remember praying while thinking of God through "feminine" imagery: earth, unity, silence, sweet-

ness, gentleness. Of an activist and aggressive temperament, it seemed to me important to ask that the *other* side of human nature—and God's nature—be brought out in me. I was helped in these reflections by the preponderance of feminine words used of God in Latin: *Sapientia, Silentia, Contemplatio, Nox, Caritas, Pax* . . . I thought of God as, in part, feminine. Metaphors of "lover" and "spouse" encouraged a similar switch in imagery.

My reading in medieval literature reinforced my sense that "the feminine principle" is as much at the heart of the universe as "the masculine principle." I used to be touched by the prayers of medieval knights—barbarians, of great ferocity and cruelty—asking to be made vehicles of courtesy, charity, compassion, gentleness. As Nietzsche argued, Christianity did bring about a certain "feminization" of the Western spirit. It "emasculated" the Germanic gods.

Moreover, it seemed to me that modern historians of philosophy and theology failed to be sufficiently critical of the move from medieval to modern consciousness. In general, they approved of the switch from contemplation to action, from being to doing, from knowledge-as-union to knowledge-as-power, from wisdom to science. In the modern period, "Lady Philosophy" and "the Queen of the Sciences" yielded to an aggressive science that would "change the world." Knowledge is, not being, or reconciliation, or community, but power.

The modern period is understandable, in mythical terms, as the masculinization of intellect. Resignation is the opiate of the people. Activist world-improvement sets the pattern the "hero" must fulfill.

Even God, naturally enough, comes to be perceived through new images. No longer "static" or "passive" or "un-

changing" or "contemplative" (mother with child) or Pure Act. But Judge, Issuer of "manifest destinies," "Co-creator" of evolutionary history, Fellow Struggler, Revolutionary, Pure Activist.

Images of God tend to follow our best images of humans. Whatever we find most admirable in human beings, we tend to imagine as some dim premonition of what the unseen God might be like.

In the modern period, valuing makers and shapers of history, we tend to imagine God as the "Lord of History." Valuing the future more than the past or the present, we tend to imagine God as "the Absolute Future." Valuing the "masculine" qualities, and disvaluing the "feminine," it is no wonder that women want to be "liberated" so as to feel valued. They want to be as godlike, so to speak, as men. To share in the strong symbols. To live and move and have being.

On the other hand, in recent years the "masculine" qualities have taken something of a beating. "Masculine" will looks like an ego trip. "Masculine" assertiveness is known as aggression. "Masculine" courage is ridiculed as *machismo*. Men are wearing long hair and preaching gentleness. Silence, contemplation, abandonment, emptiness, waiting, "doing nothing at all" are once again valued by a significant minority.

In all the ancient languages, Raymond Pannikar tells me, one of the central names for God is always feminine. For the universe is conceived as uniting two principles: masculine and feminine. Thus also God. To pray is to be in the presence not only of Act, Energy, Deed, but also in the presence of Act, Energy, Being. Act and energy are not merely transitive—the passing of energy from one object to another, making a difference,"

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heard one on TV or radio by any of the media asking why we as taxpayers should have suffered the enormous expense of five separate trials of Calley, Medina, Henderson, Hutto, et al. when they might all have been tried together in one trial as the "Mylai Five" for their respective or corporate roles in the events growing out of that single occurrence in one village, during several hours of time, by members of the same army, division, battalion, and company.

Article 81 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice of course (I used to try and defend courts martial in the Army) is a straight conspiracy article, such as the law under which Doctor Spock and his friends were tried, and David Dellinger and his friends, and Philip Berigan and his friends. Why not then try the "Mylai Five" for a dual purpose conspiracy: 1) to perpetrate, and/or 2) to attempt to conceal the slayings at Mylai?

Unless we are willing to face to bold and harsh realities of our uneven-handedness of justice, we must say that such a charge was overlooked. Was it used in one case because it is supposedly so easy to convict, and not in the other case for the very same reason? As a lawyer who also teaches law, I hope we do away with the conspiracy law altogether because the Government has shown not the least delicacy or fairness in using it, and if Congress will act to take it away, then there will be some slight check on the abuses of the prosecutorial discretion by the executive branch of government.

WILLIAM CUNNINGHAM, S.J.

Father Cunningham was one of the lawyers for the defense at Harrisburg.



Michael Novak (Cont.)

"changing history." They are that.

But act and energy are also developmental, organic, interior, altering not only the world outside but also and chiefly the self. It is a powerful "act" to regard a Tintoretto for hours, without moving; or to be absorbed by a view from the mountains; or to con-

centrate one's attention and will in a single, wordless "Yes" or "No"; or to watch one's children at play; or to work with hammer and saw on projects around one's home.

That is to say, the highest, primary forms of action are not only those the modern West is quickest to value. There are powerful forms of action we are slower to value, although even now they furnish some of the most frequent (and delightful) moments of our lives.

God, whom we do not see and cannot speak of, is known to us through the best things we observe around us. Many of these we need special encouragement to notice and to value, for our culture is not remarkably humanistic in its tutoring. Our culture is hostile to humans, and hence to satisfactory images of God.

Valuing abandonment into God's will, valuing silence, valuing gentleness, we value what used to be thought of in the images of the feminine. Such things are desperately needed by men, if they are to be whole. Women, too, aspire to all the possibilities of the universe, so that they may be whole.

And we are entitled to think of God as both "masculine" and "feminine." Not only that, given the masculine biases of our own culture, we need to give our imaginations impulse into unfamiliar areas. The Christian God is neither feminine nor masculine. He contains in himself the principle of all things: including the masculine and the feminine.

And for this reason, we should perhaps think of "God the Father" not literally as male, but rather as the "generator," the parent, father-mother, bringing forth her son. Thinking of God as Earth, as Earth bearing forth a Son, is an ancient way of guiding the intelligence accurately: the Source of all things gives birth.

The imagery of Spirit, too, is feminine: Dove, Paraclete, Consoler, Breath, Water—and perhaps even Fire.

The point is, the human animal is whole only if it develops both the qualities thought of as "feminine" and those thought of as "masculine." Each of us, perhaps, needs to lean against

our own tendencies.

And the image of God, when it is what it ought to be, is an image of human diversity and wholeness. We need to work harder, in our day, to overcome the heavy masculine sensibility both of our culture and of our religion. Women are often caught, then, in a double struggle: forcing themselves to be bold and decisive in their personal development, finding suitable "feminine" images for God. Men, in a reverse way, share the same struggle. To be whole, we all need help.

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