

TOPIC: MODELS OF DIVINITY

To begin...

God is spirit. God is neither male nor female – any more than God is fire, rock, shepherd, shield, wind, king, light, or any other image we project. The images we choose for God, however, affect our relationship with God. They modify our view of ourselves and of others. They even affect our political, social and economic systems. The God images we inherit and those we choose to use in prayer shape our lives.

It is precisely a woman's experience of God that this world lacks. God the lawgiver, God the judge, God the omnipotent being has consumed Western spirituality and in the end shrouded its heart and swallowed its soul. (Joan Chittister, an American Benedictine)

Dennis Nineham, in the epilogue to *The Myth of God Incarnate*, writes that it is 'at the level of the *imagination* that contemporary Christianity is most weak'. He goes on to say that people

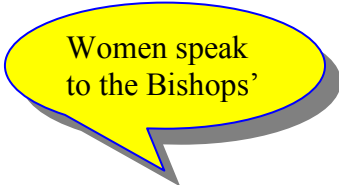
'find it hard to believe in God because they do not have available to them any lively imaginative picture of the way God and the world as they know it are related. What they need most is a story, a picture, a myth, that will capture their imagination, while meshing in with the rest of their sensibility in the way that messianic terms linked with the sensibility of first-century Jews, or Nicene symbolism with the sensibility of philosophically-minded fourth-century Greeks. (Quoted in *Models of God, Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, p. 31 Sally Mc Fague)

God created man **in the image of himself**,
In the image of God he created him,
Male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27)

I believe in God who created woman and man
in God's own image
Who created the world
and gave both sexes the care of the earth. (Woman's Creed)

Discuss:

How does a person's image of God make a difference to their view of themselves and their world, to their prayer?



Women speak
to the Bishops'

A woman from Queensland emphasised the importance of the feminine being recognised as part of the divinity:

The sexist language used by the Church is a barrier to women's and girls' participation in even the most basic thing, the liturgy. Women and girls are being denied the basic human right of having their very existence acknowledged and their being made in the likeness and image of God celebrated. We cannot participate fully until the feminine is recognised as part of the divinity and

included in the language about the people of God. Until the language of liturgy is true to the ancient scripts and uses the feminine images of God that are present there in the Scriptures and used both pronouns or none for God. (p.98)

When God is acknowledged to be beyond male and female, language must change. This acknowledgement, when it reflects accurately a change of consciousness, will automatically acknowledge and call forth the giftedness of women. (p. 114)

The concern regarding exclusive language was extended to the use of religious imagery and, indeed, the broader symbol system of the Catholic Church:

Were it just the language that was androcentric, its effects would be far-reaching enough... but it is more than that. The entire theological symbol system has been constructed in a male-generated way that is out of touch with the twentieth century... The failure of the Church to draw on new images which touch the lives of today's women and men, renders much of the symbol system antiquated... The entire Church community is being denied the richness of imagery emerging in contemporary theological and spiritual traditions. (p. 99)



What are some of the male images of God that are found in the Catholic liturgy of the Eucharist?

What would be some of the benefits to the Church according to the women above if inclusive language was used?

As you read the account below think about the answer to these questions:

How does a people's image of God make a difference to life in that culture? What are some of the social and political implications of thinking of God as either male or female?

If you had grown up in a religion whose image of God was primarily feminine, how would it have affected you? As a boy? As a girl?

Why the image of God became male – an historical overview.

Images of God have not always been masculine. In fact, humans have actually envisioned and worshiped God as a woman much longer than as a man. Scientists have unearthed countless statues of females, statues that held positions of honour in homes and shrines. Scholars first thought these were a variety of goddesses to whom people prayed for fertility in their, families, their animals, and their crops. More recent studies in archeology and anthropology, however, reveal that they do not represent a variety of goddesses. They image a Goddess as the dominant deity.

This feminine God has different names in different cultures. The Divine Presence was *Nut* in Egypt, *Siva* in Russia, *Nammu* In Sumaria. *Eurynome* in Greece and so on - all female names. For about twenty thousand years, the people of these regions worshiped the Great Holy One as feminine.

In the period which followed (about 7000-2000 B.C.E.) people continued to worship God - or the highest of the gods – as female in the cultures of Europe, England, Ireland, Wales, the Mediterranean (including northern Africa), large parts of Russia, India, and other parts of the Near

East. Among her titles were Queen of the Universe, Mother of All Creation, Queen Above All Gods. In contrast to the peoples who thought of God as feminine, many other peoples in other areas of the world spoke of and prayed to God as if God were masculine.

Many of the cultures who worshiped a feminine God also focused on women's contributions as more essential. Their societies were largely agrarian, and women's knowledge and skills in cultivating, preserving, and healing were at the heart of survival and growth. Women were honoured because they had the power of giving birth, they were at the centre of family, commerce and religion. In many places women not only owned land, but passed it on through their daughters. Women had or shared responsibility for business and trade. Because they were perceived to image God, they were the religious leaders of the temples. They had freedom, prestige and choice in their lives.

In contrast, the masculine-God worshipers came from harsher climates where the meat and skins of hunted or herded animals were the source of survival. Their societies heralded the physical strength and skills of men. These groups had become patriarchies, societies in which only men could rule or become mediators of the Divine. Men controlled commerce, property - and women. The masculine image of God

The male-ruled groups invaded the feminine-God worshiping societies during a five-thousand-year period. They conquered and settled in their territories. Sometimes male-God and female God worshipers blended aspects of their societies and religions.

Both deities 'married' and reigned equally. As patriarchy became stronger, however, the male deity became the superior God. Eventually, the feminine figure was demoted from sovereignty to being a caretaker of some area of specialty such as fertility or the underworld.

The Hebrew tribes, who were among those who invaded the Near East at the end of this period (about 2000B.C.E.), were strongly patriarchal. Their all-male priesthood (the Levites) condemned any feminine images as treacherous, as 'an abomination'. The image of God as a woman challenged their whole social and political system of male domination. These tribes destroyed whole peoples who still worshiped a female God-or any other God whose image differed from the one they honoured.

The Hebrews' words and images have influenced the whole Western world's way of looking at God. Through the Bible, the most widely read book of the West, the Hebrew masculine God is most often presented as warrior, king, and judge - although He is sometimes pictured as a lover, a redeemer, and a caring parent. Once in a great while we find in the Bible a feminine image of God.

Yahweh says...

Like a son comforted by his mother
Will I comfort you. (Is 66:12-13)

I was like someone who lifts an infant
close against her cheek stooping down to
him I gave him his food. (Hos 11.4)

We are all meant to be mothers of God,
For God is always needing to be born.
(Meister Eckhart – medieval mystic)

**Think of a 'non-person' image of God
e.g. light, cloud, water, the world as the
body of God. Close your eyes and let it
fill you. What qualities of God do you
experience?**

**Think of a feminine image of God e.g.
mother, goddess, womb. Let it fill you.
What qualities of God do you
experience? Write a prayer addressed
to God in a feminine image using the
appropriate pronouns.**