

A review of: *She who is: the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse* / Elizabeth A Johnson. - New York: Crossroad, 1993.

Reviewed by Brian McKinlay

In *She who is*, Elizabeth Johnson presents a Christian theology expressed in female images. Liberationist theologies, including feminist, are necessarily concerned with the imagery and language we use in discourse about God. New God-language is part of new theology - that is, new ways of thinking about God.

There is nothing wrong with male images of God as such. But they are too often used in sexist ways, exclusively, literally and patriarchally.¹ Though the word "God" has been associated with many evils as well as blessings, Johnson prefers to keep it. There is no adequate alternative, and its use may yet be transformed.² To refer to the divinity only as "God" avoids androcentrism. It is sometimes preferable to speak of God in nonpersonal language such as Tillich's "ground of all being". However, it is also important to use personal language, to describe, for example, God's love and compassion in relationship with us.³ This is where the question of gender arises. "One way to stretch language and expand our repertoire of images", Johnson argues, "is by uttering female symbols into speech about divine mystery. It is a complex exercise, not necessarily leading to emancipatory speech."⁴ The author's analysis,

... does not lead to the conclusion that in a different context traditional male symbols of God, key among them the image of father, could not function beneficently to point to the mystery of God ... but in the concrete situation of patriarchy, such symbols do not function to emancipate women, however much they may be adjusted toward kindness and other desirable characteristics.⁵

There is always the danger that the female images will be taken literally, replacing masculine idols with feminine ones. However, Johnson considers the benefits of female images of God to outweigh the potential dangers.⁶

The author shows that it is insufficient simply to ascribe to an otherwise masculine God traits traditionally associated with the feminine. Nor is it sufficient to find a "feminine" dimension in God, often in the person of the Holy Spirit, for God is

¹ p.33

² pp.42-3

³ p.45

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ p.40

⁶ pp. 45-6

not one who can be stereotyped in this way. Nor should there be a stereotypical understanding of what is feminine.⁷

"We must be very clear about this. Speech about God in female metaphors does not mean that God has a feminine dimension, revealed by Mary or other women. Nor does the use of male metaphors mean that God has a masculine dimension, revealed by Jesus or other men; or an animal dimension, revealed by lions or great mother birds; or a mineral dimension, which corresponds to naming God as a rock. Images and names of God ... intend to evoke the whole.⁸

... The point for our interest is that the female deity is not the expression of the feminine dimension of the divine, but the expression of the fullness of divine power and care shown in a female image. The mystery of God transcends all images but can be spoken about equally well and poorly in concepts taken from male or female reality.⁹

Johnson prefers a strategy of equivalent images of God, female and male. She spends much of the rest of the book examining sources of female images of God.

Part II of *She who is* examines women's interpreted experience, scripture, and classical theology as sources of female imagery of God. All revelation of God to women and men is mediated through human experience. Unless women are denied identity with the *imago Dei*, it is simply nonsense to androcentrically devalue their experience of the divine. But women's experience is not simply co-equal to that of men. The struggle of women for equality can give them special experience of God as liberator.

If scripture were literally inerrant, the church would have "no option in the light of women's pressing experience but to continue to repeat the pattern of language about God as metaphor of ruling men",¹⁰ Elizabeth Johnson argues. However, theology does offer alternative hermeneutical models. In *Dei Verbum*, for example, Vatican II wrote that the scriptures teach "firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation."¹¹ "It is most emphatically not salvific", Johnson comments, "to diminish the image of God in women ... and to legitimate their subordination."¹²

⁷ Johnson cites Ruether's assertion that the very concept of the feminine is a construction of patriarchy. (pp.49 and 54, citing Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The female nature of God: a problem in contemporary religious life", in *God as Father? /* ed. by J.B. Metz and E. Schillebeeckx. - New York: Seabury, 1981, pp.61-66)

⁸ p.54

⁹ p.56

¹⁰ p.77

¹¹ p. 78, citing *Dogmatic constitution on Divine revelation (Dei verbum)*. - Rome: 1965, 11

¹² p.79

In discussing Biblical symbols of God, the author shows that Jesus himself by no means described God exclusively as "father". As well, the very Spirit of God is often described in feminine language. The strongest Biblical female image of God is the personification of God as Wisdom (*Sophia* in Greek). Wisdom is plainly described as female and the attributes and actions of Wisdom in scripture are often those of the Divine. This is not to offer an alternative God/ess. Rather it is to enrich our language concerning the One God with a metaphor both female and soundly scriptural.

Part III of the book is a discussion of each person of the trinity in female metaphor - *Spirit-Sophia*, *Jesus-Sophia* and *Mother-Sophia*. Perhaps the most difficult of these might be Jesus - the most overtly male member of the Godhead. In the human history of Jesus, Johnson declares,

The Spirit who pervades the universe becomes concretely present in a small bit of it; Sophia pitches her tent in the midst of the world; the Shekinah dwells among the suffering in a new way ... Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.¹³

"What then has gone wrong?" she asks.

For despite the potential benefit devolving from the history of Jesus the Christ feminist theology raises a most stringent critique, pointing out that of all the doctrines of the church, Christology is the one most used to suppress and exclude women.¹⁴

What is at issue is not that Jesus was a male human being. His maleness is intrinsic to his historical identity. Difficulty arises, rather, from the way this fact of maleness has been construed in androcentric theology and practice.¹⁵ In New Testament times, Christology was inclusive of women, but Hellenistic influences later gave it masculine bias. Feminist thinkers have shown that the very maleness of Jesus has been and become a basis on which to devalue those who are female.¹⁶

Johnson speaks most beautifully of Jesus' ministry of the *Sophia*-God's gifts of life and liberation. The Christ is not simply Jesus, but the risen one unified with and giving life to the church that is his body. Profoundly transformed, the Christ became

¹³ p.150

¹⁴ p.151 For an example of this critique, see Rosemary Radford Ruether "Can Christology be liberated from patriarchy?" in *Reconstructing the Christ symbol: essays in feminist Christology* / M. Stevens (ed.). - Paulist Pr., 1993, pp.7-28

¹⁵ p.152

¹⁶ So strong has this been that some feminists have found it impossible to relate to a God preeminently represented by Jesus, a male. Their criticism is in part a response to Catholic pronouncements against women's ordination on the basis that Christ, being male, may be truly represented in ordained roles only by males. (See, most recently, John Paul II, *On reserving the priestly ordination to men alone*. - Aust. edn. - Homebush: St.Paul, 1994) To me, the Catholic argument is thin and it is simply ridiculous to say that that a woman could not represent a man in the things of God and *vice versa*.

one whose sex is unimportant. More important is the relationship in which God "joins the world in the flesh to heal, redeem and liberate."¹⁷

The author also analyses traditional theologies that expound Father-Son-Spirit hierarchy within the Trinity. Scriptural language is fluid in its description of the role and identity of each person in the Trinity. It speaks of each in female and male images. Joining her analysis with classical doctrine, Johnson finds in the Trinity a radical equality that is not a solitary being but a communion in love. The Trinity itself is thus a profound critique of patriarchal domination in church and society.¹⁸

Classical theology has God in no relationship of necessity with creation. However, if the inherent nature of God is fundamentally one of relationship, this impels a mystical and personal relationship between God and the world. Johnson finds a panentheistic¹⁹ model helpful to express this. It is suited to the use of female metaphors of God's relationship(s) in and with the world.

What shall we call this God, other than simply as "The-One-to-whom-we-are-related"? This is the question asked before the burning bush.²⁰ God's name for the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is I AM WHO I AM. God is the one who *is*, not merely HE WHO IS, but SHE WHO IS, in whose fellowship "women and men are called to be friends of God and prophets."²¹

The book's last chapter, "Suffering God: compassion poured out", is a powerful afterword. It argues against the classical concept of the impassibility of God, observing that male and female thinkers, Catholic, Protestant and secular, find it "both intellectually inadequate and religiously repugnant."²² Only a suffering God can help in the suffering and anguish which women have experienced and still experience.²³

¹⁷ p.169

¹⁸ p.223

¹⁹ Panentheism: "The belief that that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in Him, but (as against pantheism) that Being is more than, and is not exhausted by, the universe." *Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church*. - London: Oxford UP., 1974, p.1027, cited by Johnson at p. 231.

²⁰ Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Exodus 3.13-14 (NRSV)

²¹ p.244

²² p.250

²³ Though a feminist perspective informs our perception of a suffering God, such a suffering God is not *ipso facto* female.

To speak of a suffering God requires reshaping our notion of God's omnipotence, and we are still struggling to find language to describe God's power in this context.²⁴

This book is densely written, covering a complex network of topics in its 272 pages. It would have benefited from better editing. Many of the sentences are long. At times, the style is heavy and wordy, detracting from the impact of the author's ideas. Even simple ideas are described in complex language, making the reader's task difficult.²⁵

The author's discussion of the place of language and imagery in understanding of God (Part I of the book) was particularly helpful to me. It helped me to work through my own position as a man of feminist sympathies who is nevertheless deeply moved by some male images of God - especially as father and brother. Similarly helpful were Johnson's ideas on the place of women's experience and the use of scripture.

The author's use of the *Sophia* image poses some problems. Johnson specifically seeks not to present a second or alternative God. However Mary Aquin O'Neil, for example, argues that the *Sophia* presented by Johnson seems to be a different God from the one known to Christian belief. Johnson's *Sophia* avoids the harsher aspects of God's behaviour, such as Jesus' cleansing of the temple. On the other hand, only negative male images are presented, neglecting the compassion and responsibility shown by many of the forefathers.²⁶

I find a metaphor based on an abstract attribute of God (regardless of gender) inadequate for me to grasp an image of God. God is wisdom and love, but neither love nor wisdom is God. Nor is wisdom in the grammatical sense a proper name (at least in English). It is easier to understand God as Mother than as Wisdom. This may seem a trivial distinction. Nevertheless, if metaphors and images of the Divine are to be helpful, they need to be "enculturated" - drawn from our own languages and cultures.

²⁴ pp.269-270

²⁵ One reviewer [Elaine Farmer "New dimensions in God talk." *St. Mark's Review* 159:37-38, Spring, 1994] goes so far as to describe the book as "elegantly written in a refreshingly readable style". However, Jane Williams in her review [*Modern theology* 10(1):113-114, Jan., 1994], says that Johnson's "enterprise is slightly marred by the author's extraordinarily turgid style. She never uses one word where she can say it in ten, and always prefers polysyllables to monosyllables."

²⁶ O'Neil, Mary Aquin, [Review] *Religious Studies Review* 21(1):19-21, Jan. 1995, p.21

Theological speech in human images cannot describe God fully. Still less can female metaphors for God alone assuage the suffering and alienation of women. But as Elizabeth Johnson suggests, and has done herself in this book, the opening of God-language to the female makes possible the practice of hope.²⁷

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²⁷ p.271

²⁸ The description "Review" indicates that the title of the review is simply the bibliographic citation of *She who is* (New York, 1995).