

Why God is Father and Not Mother

Mark Brumley

"The Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man" is how the 19th century liberal Protestant theologian Adolph Harnack once summarized the Christian faith. Nowadays Harnack would find his brand of reductionist religion dismissed as hopelessly sexist and exclusive by many feminist theologians. The "brotherhood of man" might be reworked into "the family of humanity" or its equivalent. But what would they do about the Fatherhood of God? Can we replace the allegedly "sexist" language of Divine Fatherhood with so-called gender-inclusive or gender-neutral terms such as Father/Mother or Heavenly Parent without further ado?

Many people – including some Catholics – say "yes." "We not only can," they contend, "we must. God is, after all, beyond gender. Calling God 'Father' without adding that God is also Mother unfairly exalts one image for God above all others and ignores the culturally conditioned nature of all our images of God," they argue.

A Consensus of the Many and the One

Of course, not everyone agrees. While most "mainline" Protestant churches have acquiesced, Evangelicals, the Orthodox churches and the Catholic Church have maintained traditional language for God – although even within these communions some people's sympathies run in the other direction.

That the Catholic Church and these churches and ecclesial communities would agree on a point of doctrine or practice presents a formidable unity against feminist "God-Talk." How often do we find that kind of united witness among that range of Christians? Yet as solid a prima facie case as that makes, a more serious obstacle to feminist revisionism exists – an insurmountable one, in fact. Not the witness of this group of Christians, or that, but of Christ Himself. The commonplace manner in which Christians address the Almighty as Father comes from Him. In fact, Jesus actually used a more intimate word, Abba or "Daddy."

Unfortunately, twenty centuries of Christian habit has eclipsed the "scandal" of this. For the Jews of Jesus' day, however, it stunned the ear. They did not usually address the All Powerful Sovereign of the Universe in such intimate, familiar terms. Yes, God was acknowledged as Father, but usually as Father of the Jewish people as a whole. Jesus went further: God is (or can be at least) your or my Father, not merely our Father or the Father of our people. Anyone who wants to fiddle with how we talk of God must reckon with Jesus.

But did Jesus really call God "Father"? Few things in modern biblical scholarship are as certain. Skeptics may

analogy or analogous language about God. Even when we speak analogously of God, however, we are still asserting something about how God really is. When we say that God is living, for example, we really attribute life to God, although it is not mere life as we know it, i.e., biological life.

Other times when we speak of God, we liken Him to something else – meaning that there are similarities between God and what we compare Him to, without suggesting that God really is a form of the thing to which we compare Him or that God really possesses the traits of the thing in question. For example, we might liken God to an angry man by speaking of "God's wrath." By this we do not mean God really possesses the trait of anger, but that the effect of God's just punishment is like the injuries inflicted by an angry man. We call this metaphor or metaphorical language about God.

When we call God Father, we use both metaphor and analogy. We liken God to a human father by metaphor, without suggesting that God possesses certain traits inherent in human fatherhood – male gender, for example. We speak of God as Father by analogy because, while God is not male, He really possesses certain other characteristics of human fathers, although He possesses these in a different way (analogously) – without creaturely limitations.

With this distinction between analogy and metaphor in mind, we turn now to the question of what it means to call God "Father."

The Fatherhood of God in Relation to Creation

We begin with God's relationship to creation. As the Creator, God is like a human father. A human father procreates a child distinct from and yet like himself. Similarly, God creates things distinct from and like Himself. This is especially true of man, who is the "image of God." And God cares for His creation, especially man, as a human father cares for his children.

But does not what we have said thus far allow us to call God Mother as well as Father? Human mothers also procreate children distinct from yet like themselves, and they care for them, as human fathers do. If we call God Father because human fathers do such things, why not call God Mother because human mothers do these things as well?

No doubt, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 239) states, "God's parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, which emphasizes God's immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature." Scripture itself, as we have seen, sometimes likens God to a mother. Yet, as we have also seen, Scripture never calls God "Mother" as such. Scripture uses feminine language for God no differently than it sometimes metaphorically uses feminine language for men.

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language is used of Him. Thus, the primary image of God in Scripture remains masculine, even when feminine similes are used: God is never called "She" or "Her." As Protestant theologian John W. Miller puts it in *Biblical Faith and Fathering*: "Not once in the Bible is God addressed as mother, said to be mother, or referred to with feminine pronouns. On the contrary, gender usage throughout clearly specifies that the root metaphor is masculine-father."

In fact, the Bible ascribes feminine characteristics to God in exactly the same way it sometimes ascribes such traits to human males. For example, in Numbers 11:12 Moses asks, "Have I given birth to this people?" Do we conclude from this maternal image that Scripture here is "depatriarchalizing" Moses? Obviously, Moses uses here a maternal metaphor for himself; he is not making a statement about his "gender identity." Likewise, in the New Testament, both Jesus (Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34) and Paul (Galatians 4:19) likened themselves to mothers, though they are men. Why, then, should we think that on those relatively rare occasions when the Bible uses feminine metaphors for God anything more is at work there than with Moses, Jesus and Paul?

Of course, there is a crucial difference between God and Moses, the Incarnate Son and Paul. The latter possess human natures in the male gender, while God, as such, is without gender because He is Infinite Spirit. Furthermore, the biblical authors obviously knew that Moses, Jesus and Paul were male and intended to assert as much by referring to them with the masculine pronoun and other masculine language. The same cannot be said about the biblical writers' notion of God. Even so, they speak of God as if He were masculine. For them, masculine language is the primary way we speak of God. Feminine language is applied to God as if it were being used of a masculine being.

Why the Masculine Language to Begin With?

Which brings us to a more fundamental issue, namely, "What is the masculine language about in the first place?" Since Christianity, as St. Augustine was overjoyed to learn, holds that God has no body, why is God spoken of in masculine terms?

We could, of course, merely insist that He has revealed Himself in this way and be done with it. That would not, however, help us understand God, which presumably is why He bothered to reveal Himself as Father to begin with. No, if we insist that God has revealed Himself as Father, we must try to understand what He is telling us by it.

Why call God Father? The question is obviously one of language. Before we can answer it, we must observe a distinction between two different uses of language – analogy and metaphor.

Sometimes when we speak of God, we assert that God really is this or that, or really possesses this characteristic or that, even if how He is or does so differs from our ordinary use of a word. We call this way of talking about God

question whether Jesus turned water into wine or walked on water. They may doubt that He was born of a Virgin or that He rose from the dead. But practically no one denies that Jesus called God "Abba" or "Father." So distinctive was the invocation in His day, so deeply imbedded in the biblical tradition is it, that to doubt it is tantamount to doubting we can know anything about Jesus of Nazareth.

What is more, not even most feminists deny it. What then to make of it?

Since Christians believe that Jesus is the fullest revelation of God, they must hold that He most fully reveals how we, by grace, should understand God: as Father. Otherwise they tacitly deny the central claim of their faith – that Christ is the fullness of God's self-disclosure to man. Non-Christians may do that, of course, but Christians cannot – not without ceasing to be Christians in any meaningful sense of the word.

"But surely we must hold," someone will object, "that Jesus' view of God was historically conditioned like that of His contemporaries? His masculine language for God cannot be part of the 'fullness of God's self-disclosure,' as you suppose. It was merely a residue of first century Jewish sexism. We must look instead to the 'transhistorical significance' of His teaching. And that is not the Fatherhood of God but the Godhood of the Father – that God is a loving Parent."

Two Errors

At least two false claims lie hidden in that objection. The first is that Jesus' own concept of God was "historically conditioned." The second that we can strip away a patriarchal "coating" to His notion of God to get at the gender-inclusive idea of the Divine Parent beneath. In other words, God's Fatherhood, per se, is not central to Jesus' revelation of God, only those qualities which fathers share with mothers – "parenthood," in other words.

But was Jesus' view of God "historically conditioned"? Not if you mean by "historically conditioned" "wholly explicable in terms of the religious thinking of His day." We have no reason to think Jesus uncritically imbibed the prevailing ideas about God. He certainly felt free to correct inadequate ideas from the Old Testament in other respects (see, for example, Matt. 5:21-48) and to contravene religious cultural norms, especially regarding women. He had women disciples, for example. He spoke with women in public. He even allowed women to be the first witnesses of His resurrection. How, then, on this most central point – the nature and identity of God—are we to suppose He was either unable, due to His own sexism and spiritual blindness, or unwilling, to set people straight about God as Father? Even if you deny Jesus' divinity or hold to a watered-down notion of it, such a view remains impossible to maintain.

Furthermore, even if Jesus had "picked up" the notion of God as Father from His surrounding culture, we cannot simply dismiss an idea as false merely because it happens to

have been held by others. Otherwise Jesus' monotheism itself could be as easily explained away on the grounds that it, too, was generally affirmed by the Jews of the day and therefore must, on this view, be only 'historically conditioned.'

Nor can we simply ignore Jesus' teaching about God's Fatherhood, as if it were peripheral to His revelation. Time and again Jesus addresses God as Father, so much so that we can say Jesus' name for God is Father. If Jesus was wrong about that, so fundamental a thing, then what, really, does He have to teach us? That God is for the poor and the lowly? The Hebrew prophets taught as much. That God is loving? They taught that as well.

Notice too that these truths – still widely held today – are subject to the "historical conditioning" argument. They are just as liable to be wrong as Jesus' views about the Fatherhood of God, are they not? They, too, can be explained away as "culturally conditioned."

Furthermore, Jesus' way of addressing God as Father is rooted in His own intimate relationship to God. Now whatever else we say about God, we cannot say that He is Jesus' mother, for Jesus' mother is not God but Mary. Jesus' mother was a creature; His Father, the Creator. "Father" and "Mother" are not, then, interchangeable terms for God in relation to Jesus. Nor can they be for us, if Catholicism's doctrine that Mary is the "Mother of Christians" is correct.

The Real Issue

Undergirding Jesus' teaching about God as Father is the idea that God has revealed Himself as to be such and that His revelation should be normative for us. God, in other words, calls the theological shots. If He wants to be understood primarily in masculine terms, then that is how we should speak of Him. To do otherwise, is tantamount to idolatry—fashioning God in our image, rather than receiving from Him, His self-disclosure as the Father.

Many Feminist theologians seek to fashion God in their image, because they think God is fashionable (in both senses of the word). Many feminists hold that God is in Himself (they would say "Herself" or "Godself") utterly unintelligible. We can, therefore, speak only of God in metaphors, understood as convenient, imaginative ways to describe our experience of God, rather than God Himself. In such a view, there is no room for revelation, understood as God telling us about Himself; we have only our own colorful, creative yet merely human descriptions of what we purport to be our experiences of the divine.

Whatever this is, it is not Christianity, which affirms that God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ. C.S. Lewis, in an essay on women's ordination in Anglicanism, put the matter thus:

"But Christians think that God Himself has taught us how to speak of Him. To say that it does not matter is to say either that all the masculine imagery is not inspired, is merely human in origin, or else that, though inspired, it is quite arbitrary and unessential. And this is surely intolerable: or, if

tolerable, it is an argument not in favor of Christian priestesses but against Christianity."

Cardinal Ratzinger made a similar point in *The Ratzinger Report*: "Christianity is not a philosophical speculation; it is not a construction of our mind. Christianity is not 'our' work; it is a Revelation; it is a message that has been consigned to us, and we have no right to reconstruct it as we like or choose. Consequently, we are not authorized to change the Our Father into an Our Mother: the symbolism employed by Jesus is irreversible; it is based on the same Man-God relationship He came to reveal to us."

Now people are certainly free to reject Christianity. But they should be honest enough to admit that this is what they are doing, instead of surreptitiously replacing Christianity with the milk of the Goddess, in the name of putting new wine into old wineskins.

Taking Another Tack

Here proponents of feminine "God talk" often shift gears. Rather than argue that Jesus' teaching was merely the product of a patriarchal mindset to which even He succumbed, they say that Jesus chose not to challenge patriarchalism directly. Instead, He subverted the established order by His radical inclusivity and egalitarianism. The logical implications of His teaching and practice compel us to accept inclusive or gender-neutral language for God, even though Christ Himself never explicitly called for it.

This argument overlooks an obvious point. While affirming the equal dignity of women was countercultural in first century Judaism, so was calling God "Abba." Some feminists counter with the claim that the very idea of a loving Heavenly Father was itself a move in the feminist direction of a more compassionate, intimate Deity. The first century Jewish patriarch, they contend, was a domineering, distant figure. But even if that were so – and there is reason to doubt such a sweeping stereotype of first century Judaism – revealing God as a loving, compassionate Father is not the same as revealing Him as Father/Mother or Parent. That Jesus corrected some people's erroneous ideas of fatherhood by calling God "Father" hardly means we should cease calling God "Father" altogether or call Him Father/Mother.

Feminists also sometimes argue that Scripture, even if not Jesus Himself, gives us a "depatriarchalizing principle" that, once fully developed, overcomes the "patriarchalism" of Jewish culture and even of other parts of the Bible. In other words, the Bible corrects itself when it comes to male stereotypes of God.

But this simply is not so. Granted, the Bible occasionally uses feminine similes for God. Isaiah 42:14, for example, says that God will "cry out like a woman in travail." Yet the Bible does not say that God is a woman in travail, it merely likens His cry to that of a woman.

The fact is, whenever the Bible uses feminine language for God, it never applies it to Him in the same way masculine