

The Politics of God-language in the Christian Tradition

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Christianity has a problem with God or rather with its language about God. This language has complex origins in the evolution of ideas in the ancient near eastern and western religious traditions. The problems with this language is its tendency to androcentrism, anthropocentrism, ethnocentrism, militarism and ascetic dualism. Yet these traditions also have countervailing patterns that include female imagery for the divine, solidarity with the poor and a quest for universal justice and wellbeing of the whole creation. In this talk I will seek to unpack key dimensions of these dilemmas, although to do so adequately would be a large book, not a 15 page paper.

I will start with a brief overview of the history of God from the Canaanites and Hebrews to classical Christianity. Some might claim that I should begin with the ancient Goddess of Paleolithic times. It has been popular among some movements of feminist spirituality to claim that the original understanding of deity was that of a Great Goddess who was immanent in the life processes of the nature with no hierarchy of men over women, humanity over nature. While this idea of deity is a very good idea, it is, as far as I can tell, a modern construction developed to counteract the ideas of God that we have received from the patriarchal past. Whether such an idea was the original view of deity in Paleolithic times is unknown and unknowable.

To know the ideas of past times, we are dependent on texts, themselves not easy to interpret, but by the nature of the development of literacy are only present from about the third millennium BCE. By that time the writing of texts was controlled by scribes at the service of ancient aristocracies and reflecting the god language of these aristocracies. Thus I start our story, not with a hypothetical concept of an original matricentric egalitarian Goddess, but with

the god-language of these ancient texts, specifically the Canaanites as the background to Hebrew understandings of the divine.

Sumero-Akkadian, Babylonian and Canaanite cultures saw divinity as a big two-gendered, multi-generational quarrelsome family. This family included an ancient grandmother and her consort, a father God and his queen-wife, and their quarrelsome offspring, male and female. Prominent among the offspring was a vibrant young Goddess who expressed exuberant sex and aggressive warfare. She was not a mother goddess and was no interest in children. She is paired with a somewhat passive god who represented rain and vegetation and who dies, defeated by the powers of drought and death in nature, and whom she resurrects and enthrones on the seat of power. In Canaanite thought this pair was named Anath and Ba'al, while the older father God and his queen were El and Asherah.

Hebrew thought grew up as part of the Canaanite world and revised its ideas. It adopted as its tribal God, Yahweh, whom it identified with the father God, El. This identification with El meant that there lingered until about the 6th century BCE popular traditions that believed that Yahweh had a consort, Asherah. Only gradually was Asherah reduced to a symbolic tree-pole and driven out of a place of worship in the official temple in Jerusalem. However this didn't mean that all female imagery disappeared from Hebrew religion. In the fourth to first centuries BCE Hebrew sages reinvented a female consort or mediator for God, Wisdom. Later Jewish mysticism developed an idea of a mediating female consort of God, God's Shekinah. Although the official concept of God was that of a universal, male monotheistic God, remnants of a female consort of God never fully disappeared.

Central to Jewish understanding was that its national God, Yahweh, had chosen them to be his people and given them the laws of life. They should

worship him alone; infidelity to their God brought strict punishment. This didn't mean originally that other gods didn't exist, but only this God should the people of Israel worship. "I am the Lord thy God, you shall have no other gods before me." Gradually Hebrew thinkers universalized this God of Israel, claiming he was the only God that existed. All other ideas of God were false idols. The other nations should be converted to worship this one God of Israel, but this was also part of a vision of a redemptive world order when Israel would rule the other nations. Thus the God of Israel remained tribal, but with imperial aspirations.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the chief rival of the Hebrew God is Ba'al. Yahweh seeks to supplant the worship of Ba'al, taking over from Ba'al the functions of promoting rain and fertility. Yahweh also appropriates the aggressive militarism of Anath, but not her exuberant sexuality. Two characteristics of Anath and Ba'al are distanced from Yahweh, sex and death. Unlike Anath and Ba'al, the Hebrew God is not pictured as having sex, although he has a patriarchal relation to legitimate married procreation. And, although he causes much death, especially in war, death does not touch him. Sex and death becomes areas of pollution taboos which the observant do not touch in order to remain pure and so be able to enter into the presence of God.

Christianity built on and revised the Hebrew view of God. By linking the Hebrew God with a crucified/resurrected prophet-Messiah, it embraced the theme of a dying and rising god of Ba'alism. But it rejected an exuberant sexual Goddess who resurrects and enthrones him. Christ's death and resurrection is played out as obedience to God the Father, overcoming human sin and death. In the cult of Mary and Mother Church Christianity develops an asexual female consort of God who is simultaneously the bride and mother of God's son, Christ, while remaining a virgin. Christianity also revised strict monotheism to

create a trinitarian God who is both unitary and plural, one and three, to encompass God the Father, the wisdom or Word of God incarnate in Jesus and a presence of the divine in creation and redemption, the Holy Spirit.

Initially Christianity rejected the tribal nationalism of the Hebrew view of God for a universal God of all nations. But it carried over the idea of a divine election of a chosen people, transferring this to the universal church. By the fourth century it linked this idea of a universal church sent to convert all nations with a universal Roman empire called to rule all nations. Thus its universalism becomes linked with imperialism, the expanding rule of an elect people of God who alone represent the true God. Through them his religion destined to triumph over the other peoples of the earth. It also links this imperialism with a militaristic God and warrior Messiah of Hebrew apocalyptic who will defeat the enemies of God in a bloody war of good against evil.

Christianity also increasingly appropriated the philosophical theology of Plato and Aristotle, thus linking the Christian God with metaphysical dualism. God is identified with mind and spirit, over against body and matter. This dualism of mind versus body moves toward ascetic dualism, cultivated by a monastic male elite who focus on the inner intellectual spirit by denying the body and eschewing sex and reproduction. The earth and its physical life processes are seen as in a terminal state, soon to disappear for a purely spiritual life in heaven. The Christian is one who denies the flesh in order to become citizens of this otherworldly heaven which will supersede this earth and its physical life processes.

Having detailed briefly this history of God from Canaanites to patristic Christianity, I will unpack the consequences of these ideas of God for women, the earth and other peoples and cultures; in other words, its androcentrism, anthropocentrism, ethnocentrism, militarism and asceticism.

The Christian view of God is predominately androcentric, that is to say, it is identified as a male, although remnants of a female secondary manifestation of God never fully disappear. This means maleness is seen as more godlike than femaleness. Male-female duality is assimilated into metaphysical dualism of body and spirit. Femaleness is linked to sex, body and mortality and thus alien to God who is sexless, disembodied and immortal. Yet all males are not equally godlike, although every male is more godlike than any woman. But those who are most godlike are ascetic males of the intellectual, ecclesial ruling class. This class is in rivalry with the political ruling class of Christian empire, whether in Byzantium or Western Europe. Only with difficulty do Christian priests grant a place for Christian emperors or kings as representatives of God. Hierarchy is inherent in androcentrism; that is, God is seen not only as male, but as the apex of a male ruling class, ecclesial and political. Thus those ruled over by this male ruling class, women, slaves, peasants, stand in a secondary mediated relation to God, obeying God through obeying their male rulers, fathers, husbands, priests and kings.

The Christian view of God also fosters ethnocentric imperialism. Christians are identified as God's new elect people who have a mission to convert the peoples of all other religions. This mission becomes identified with Christian empire or Christendom, whether the Christianized Roman empire or successors to it, the Holy Roman empire, the Spanish empire, the British empire and today the American empire. These empires are seen as the bearers of God's redemptive true faith and way of life.

Christian conquistadors and missionaries go out hand in hand to convert the heathen to Christianity and to establish the benevolent rule of the Spanish, British or American over inferior people who are in need of Christianizing and civilizing. Christian empires position themselves as bearers of the true faith and

the higher civilization. This mission to Christianize and civilize is seen as a messianic redemptive mission. That is, when all peoples are converted to the Christian empire's view of Christian faith and assimilated into its superior way of life (or else annihilated), the Kingdom of God and redemption of the world will be completed.

Today the primary representative of this Christian imperial messianic mission is the United States of America. The U.S. Americans absorbed from its English Puritan ancestors a belief in themselves as an elect nation designated by God to embody the true Christian faith and the redeemed way of life ordered by obedience to God's commandments. This idea was transmitted and reinterpreted by the founding fathers of the American Revolution, which saw American society as the redemptive expression of freedom and democracy that should be spread to all other nations, overcoming inferior forms of political order. Although claiming to represent the universal "rights of man," these rights were not only denied to women, but also initially to all other peoples seen as non-whites. African slaves were not included in the rights of Man, and Indians were to be both excluded and to be eliminated by the triumphant Anglo-Saxon elect people of God destined to spread across the American continent.

In the mid-19th century, the Mexicans become the third non-white people to be pushed aside by the manifest destiny of God's Anglo-Saxon Protestant elect nation to occupy the whole of the continent. Various immigrant groups were also looked on with suspicion as not capable of becoming fully American, such as the Irish who were both Celts and Catholics. During the Mexican American war the abuse of Irish in the conquering American army became so oppressive that several hundred Irish deserted to the Mexican side, founding the St Patricks' Brigade, fighting under a green flag emblazoned with a golden harp and the words Erin go Bragh. These members of the Ballalon de San Patricio

were duly rounded up, whipped, branded and hung when the American army caught up with them in Mexico City. They are still honored as heroes and martyrs by Mexico today.

However in due time the Irish in America assimilated and became “white,” as did various other European immigrants. In the process the concept of the WASP American elect nation expanded to include Jews and Catholics of European descent. But this ability to assimilate continues to have uneasy limits, represented historically by the African and the Indian, but still today the Mexican “illegal immigrant” and now particularly by the Muslim.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries this expanding American empire of Christian and democratic righteousness leapt the boundaries of the continent and conquered the remnants of the Spanish empire in Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, as well as Guam and Hawaii. With other European empires, the US set its eyes on China as well. Areas of the Caribbean and the Pacific were designated as American turf, with continual military interventions to suppress independence movements in countries like Nicaragua, Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

During the Cold war years of 1946-1990 the US became the champion of Godly western civilization against Godless communism. Anti-communism as the war of the American way of life against “totalitarian” communism became the American civil religion, justifying continual interventions in national liberation movements around the world, most notably in Vietnam and throughout Latin America, to maintain American hegemony. In the process the United States built an empire of economic and military dominance around the globe, represented by American bases and commands on every continent.

With the collapse of the USSR this anti-communist crusade lost its original rationale, but the American military quickly began to construct a new global

enemy, finding it in militant Islam represented especially by Iran. The collapse of the USSR was seen as the opportunity for the US to shake off the limitations of multilateralism for unabashed American dominance of the globe. The rise of militant Islam with its apocalyptic religious language also reactivated an American Christian religious language that see the US as representing the true God and divine mission to save the world against demonic powers of evil. George Bush as a born-again Christian, supported by militant evangelicals, readily uses the crusading language of a war of Good against evil, God against Satan.

This messianic god-language identified with American military empire was made explicit in the speeches made by General William Boykin, a prominent American general charged with the hunt for Osama bin Ladin. In speeches to his conservative Christian constituents Boykin declared that America is an object of hate by other nations because it is uniquely a “Christian nation.” He went on to say that “our spiritual enemy can only be defeated when we confront them in the name of God.” Muslims, he believes, worship an idol and not the true God. Boykin opined that God has put George Bush in the White House for this time. “We are an army of God raised up for such a time as this.” In effect George Bush is God’s elect Messiah put in power to lead an apocalyptic war of God’s chosen people against the demonic powers of the last days. The ethnocentrism latent in Christian god-language thus has found its most extreme expression today as a tool of American empire.

Anthropocentrism construes the human (i.e. male ruling class) as God’s representative to rule over the rest of the creation. Humans are seen as given unlimited dominion over the whole earth to use its resources as they will. For forty years ecologists have warned us that the present form of development is threatening the viability of the human project in relation to the ecosystems of

the entire earth. But militant Christians of the sort that support George Bush have made ecology their bete noir, claiming it to be a form of paganism and apostasy to the true faith in unlimited human dominion over the earth as representatives of God.

This hostility to ecology in the name of God and the human as God's representative also reflects the long standing hostility to the body and sexuality in Christian heritage. Side by side with his militarist imperialism, Bush positions himself as the champion of heterosexual marriage against gays who might wish to sanctify their relationships and against those who seek to legalize abortion, birth control and sexual education. Africans dying AIDs by the millions are counseled to practice abstinence as the solution to their problems. Stem cells are treated with great reverence, not to be used for curing disease. In effect we find in Bush and various other Christian anti-sexual conservatives an ideology which demands that the right to life be absolutized between conception and birth, although dispensable after birth. What we see here is a strange fruit of that combination of ascetic fear of sex, and militaristic aggression, deeply rooted in the view of God as simultaneously ascetic and violent.

How do we deconstruct these terrible consequences of a view of God through the lenses of androcentrism, ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism, asceticism and militarism? It is not easy to turn these patterns around through the resources of the Christian traditions. I will briefly describe the problems of overcoming these patterns in the quest for an understanding of God that is truly inclusive of all life forms and expressive of their mutual flourishing.

Let us start with androcentrism, God as the representative of the male ruling class, in relation to women and to the poor and oppressed. To include women in the image of God may seem easy. One simply says "he and she" and

recognizes that God can be imaged as both mother and father. One can also retrieve the remnants of female God language that have continued to exist in the Christian traditions, such as God as Wisdom. But the matter is more difficult. The rare use of the Wisdom tradition in Scripture and theology uses female imagery, but always as a secondary expression of a male God who mediates between God and creation. Wisdom is never fully equal with God.

Elizabeth Johnson, in her book She who Is, made a valiant effort to make Wisdom language central to the understanding of God as all three persons in the Trinity. She does this by feminizing the language for Father, Son and Spirit, but this masculine language still lurks in the background. As soon as male imagery becomes explicit, it tends to subordinate female imagery as dependent and auxiliary, rather than genuinely interchangeable with male God language.

The effort to overcome elitism in God language was most fully expressed by Latin American liberation theology which spoke of God as the liberator of the poor and God's preferential option for the poor. But the concept of preferential option for the poor threatened to be confused with a new doctrine of election in which the poor now become God's elect or favored people against the rich. What happens when the poor are no longer poor or do the poor have to remain poor to remain God's elect? Clearly what is meant by God's preferential option for poor needs to be clarified.

The point is not God's election of one group against another, but divine preference for justice, for societies where all flourish equitably. Affirmative action on behalf of the poor, together with relinquishment of unjust hoarding of excessive wealth by the rich are means to the end of a just society for all, where there are no more extremes of wealth for a few built on the impoverishment the many.

To move from a God for women and for the poor to a God of all nations is not an easy step. It is hard to untangle a universalist monotheism from imperialism. The oneness of God is deeply entrenched in the election of one people and one religion with the right of that one people and their religion to conquer all other people and their religions and cultures. Rather than reaching for inclusivity, we should start by acknowledging the limitations of any one religion and its ideas of God. All religions point in different ways to a mystery of the source of life and renewal of life, and all these efforts have validity. We need to affirm that God is the God of all peoples, who creates and affirms the diversity of religious cultures, rather than demanding that the ideas of one religion become universal by destroying all other religious cultures and assimilating or annihilating its people.

Finally, how can God overcome the distaste for body, sexuality and finitude and embrace the whole creation as the manifestation of the divine? Can God become ecological? Can Christians overcome the idea fixe that humans are the unique representatives of God and acknowledge that they are one species among others, and late comers to the planet at that? For most of the several billion years of emerging life in earth history, plant and animal life got along quite well and perhaps better without humans who only appeared in the last half million years and as a dominant species only in the last couple of thousand years. The belief that God chose us to dominant all other forms of life is a usurpation of power, not a divine gift. This usurpation is rapidly showing its toxic and death-prone nature, threatening the ecosystem of the planet with destruction.

How can humans acknowledge that we are one species among others who can sustain our own life on earth only by fitting into the flourishing of whole ecosystem in which we are an inter-dependent part? Our idea of God surely has

a role to play in this conversion of human mind to the earth and sustainable living with our fellow forms of life. God must be seen as present in all the diverse expressions of life on earth, not one in which humans are uniquely God's image called to rule all others, while also distaining body and nature and seeking an immortal life freed from its finitude and limitations. In such a God not only humans, but wolves and insects, trees and flowers, the waters that fall from the sky and the waters that well up from the earth "live and move and have their being."

The God language we need today must be ecological and feminist, overcoming racism, imperialism and militarism, metaphysical dualism and hierarchy. This would be a radical revision of the God-language of most of our tradition. One effort to engage in this radical reimagining of God is the thought of Brazilian ecofeminist theologian Ivone Gebara, Gebara sees herself as engaged in a third stage of feminist theology in Latin America, not simply adding the woman's perspective or finding female theological images or leadership role models, but dismantling the basic patriarchal paradigm of theology which has shaped all relationships; the hierarchical world view of heaven over earth, spirit over matter, mind over body, imaged as male over female, white over black, rulers over workers

Gebara has focused on the symbol of God as Trinity in her work of theological deconstruction and reconstruction. She asks, what is the human experience that is symbolized by the idea of God as Trinity? She suggests that trinity is a symbolic expression of the basic dynamic of life itself as a process of vital differentiation and interrelational creativity. Life as diversification and interrelational creativity exists on every level of reality. As cosmos it reveals itself in the whole process of cosmic unfolding into a vast variety of planets and galaxies which enter into expanding interconnection. As earth it shows us the

dynamic interrelational process of life unfolding in the biosphere. Each species ramifies into many differentiations, including humans with their many races and cultures.

This process of diversification is then complemented by a process of interconnection and communion. Life unfolds as a triune process of plurality, interdependency, communion, which is the basis for new creativity. Far from trying to reduce this diversity to one form which then subdues all the rest, the life process itself flourishes only through diversification and interconnection. To reduce this diversity to monolithic oneness is a formula for ecological collapse, not healthy life. Thus the impulse of monotheistic, monarchical monocultural unity is fundamentally contrary to the process of creating and sustaining life. This means that the whole universe and God herself can only be universal by being a communion in diversity, not reduction to singleness. This communion in diversity must embrace and celebrate each expression of the manyness, for only in affirming each expression can there be authentic interrelation and communion. Differentiation and diversity becomes hostile to communion only when one form of diversity seeks to subjugate all others to itself. Mutual affirmation of difference is the basis to true communication and communion.

This vision of God as trinitarian communion in diversity has radical implications for our understanding of what is lifegiving faith. It suggests that respect for religious diversity and profound dialogue between different cultural visions that have emerged in human history is intrinsic to authentic insight into the divine. Any effort to find God by eliminating diversity is to silence the fullness of who God is and to shut down the life process. The urge to empire, the impulse destroy all religions for one dominant religion, all cultures for one dominant culture, many economies for one dominant economy, to value one

race at the expense of the many races, one gender at the expense of others, one way of being sexual and constructing family at the expense of the many, is fundamentally anti-life, a denial of our true being in God as triune.

Much of patriarchal religion has been built on exactly this kind of splitting and repression of the many by an imposed domination; the domination of men over women, mind over body, one culture and race over others, the human over the diversity of nature. A renewed God language and renewed life on earth has to dismantle these many repressions. It needs to affirm many ways of being sexual, of being gendered, of being cultural, not as repressing each into fixed stereotypes, but opening up endless creative syntheses, what post-colonialism has called “hybridity.” Only thus does creativity flourish and we have life abundantly.