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RESEXING THE TRINITY: THE SPIRIT AS FEMININE.¹

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In her editorial in the autumn issue of *Theology* (Sept/Oct 1990), Dr Grace Jantzen is surely right when she insists that feminist theology can not be dismissed as merely trendy: the high level of scholarship belies this prejudicial characterisation.

But Dr Jantzen is also surely right when she admits 'that there are considerable differences amongst feminist theologians.' (p339) Daphne Hampson, for example, could properly be called a 'post-Christian theist'.² Perhaps Sarah Coakley's work could be understood to be a 'radical orthodoxy'³, whilst Alwyn Marriage's is really a reformed orthodoxy.⁴ We can detect in Marjorie Suchocki's work an attempt to marry radical feminism with process theology.⁵ And in the marvellously eclectic Rosemary Radford Ruether we can witness a liberationist/deconstructionist/reconstructionist at work. It is Ruether who has convincingly demonstrated the various responses of feminists to God and anthropology ranging from liberalism, to conservative and radical romanticism (and beyond)⁶

In this paper I want to look at one strand of feminism which in Ruether's terminology would be best described as conservative romanticism.⁷ It seeks to improve the dignity and self-worth of women by identifying the feminine in the Trinity. This is more than an attempt to switch labels so that we may call God 'mother' as well as or instead of 'father'. Rather the conservative romanticism I wish to identify concerns the attempt to identify the Spirit, as person, in terms of the feminine gender. The Spirit is then read back into womankind in terms of divine image. This way, it is hoped, women can be properly included — by the nature of things — in the Godhead and also find their proper personal identity and station in society.

It is of course not the case that many feminists take this particular approach. The more radical tack is to transcend gender concepts completely and with them also personal categories. The seminal work here is Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*⁸ where we are presented with a God of Power Justice and Love (p 127). Indeed Daly's predilection for substituting non-personal nouns for personal ones is compounded by her preference for substituting verbs for nouns. Janet Morley's trinitarian blessing exemplifies a full-blown Dalyesque:

May the God who dances in creation, who embraces us with human love, who shakes our lives like thunder bless us and drive us out with power to fill the world with her justice.⁹

I personally do not find the radical feminist approach an improvement on the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, but I do not want to quarrel with it here.¹⁰ To recapitulate, I wish to concentrate on the 'romantic feminism' which seeks to understand the Holy Spirit as feminine. Whilst I believe this approach to be unfortunate I think it important to recognise that in some ways the attempt to feminise the Spirit is both admirable and understandable. A short gloss on theological anthropology in the early church will demonstrate the way in which women have not always been seen to be full partakers of the *imago dei*.¹¹

St Gregory of Nyssa when talking of the creation of men and women speaks of a double creation. First there is a spiritual

creation where both men and women partake of the divine image and equally so. In anticipation of the Fall, however, God (whom Nyssa depicts as canny if not downright cunning) calls into existence a second creation where material form is manifested in the sexual natures of male and female.

In principle, however, men and women, for Gregory, are equal partakers of the divine image moving from what Sarah Coakley calls a sort of humanoid state into fallen humanity — where the woman is now helper of and submissive to the man — and eventually by grace men and women become adopted into God's androgynous nature thus transcending the sexual differentiation of the Fall.¹²

(Recent statements from the Vatican have insisted that the resurrected and ascended Christ remains male, but I am not sure that St Gregory would have said that. This is no small matter in the fierce debate over the ordination of women if, as the epistle to the Hebrews would seem to suggest, Christ as High Priest is understood eschatologically rather than incarnationally).

Augustine in contrast — and on this issue St John Chrysostom is closer to him than Gregory — rejects the splitting of androgyny into male and female natures for he believes that sexual differences are intrinsic to creation. Furthermore he sees the man as the true embodiment of the divine image though he talks about image in terms of properties in contradistinction to Chrysostom's *imago dei* which is viewed in terms of the man's superior spiritual and natural authority.

In many schemas of the early church, even where men and women are held to be created equal in the sense of both possessing the divine image as Genesis 1:27 would have it, two factors combined to place the woman in a position of inferiority.

1 The Fathers understood the begottenness of the Logos in eternity not to denote event but to highlight the one nature and being of Father and Son. When they came to Eve's begottenness in space and time they tended to say, to parody Arius, 'there was a time when Eve was not'. In Arian fashion they saw the subsequent nature of women to mean secondary or less than the fulness of the male prototype.

2 Eve is the first to sin in the Genesis narrative and this is taken to mean is therefore more culpable than Adam. The perfidiousness of Eve is then projected on to all women. Tertullian's hounding of the second sex is well illustrated by his infamous remarks, '...you are the Devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of the tree; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not brave enough to approach; you so lightly crushed the image of God, the man Adam; because of your punishment, that is death, even the Son of God had to die...'¹³

Women as the second and therefore secondary sex were doubly cursed, then, because the second sex sinned first. Women were often viewed in terms of this doubly-dimmed divine image so that an antinomy was created between the male as rational (*nous*) and therefore more like God's image and the female as carnal, lower, bodily, subordinate, dependent, and therefore less like God's image. Bodily materials, superabundant in women, were potentially dangerous if not treacherous.

Women, however, could become more spiritual (though more so in terms of *pneuma* rather than *nous*) and more like men

and ipso facto God if they overcame their bodies in ascetic endeavour.¹⁴ This became an increasingly acceptable form of spiritual and social advancement for women in the early middle ages (though even in the 3rd century there were Syriac women ascetics — heads shorn to show their at-one-ment with men)

But motherhood (and more so martyrdom) were pathways to honour in the early church for women and the positive values of the helper/server as well as the inferior qualities of womanhood developed into their own archetype. No doubt influenced by the example of his saintly sister, Macrina, Gregory of Nyssa stressed in his writings the virtues of feminine supportiveness, intuition, and altruism. No woman could match the matchless majesty of the *theotokos*, ever virgin and mother, but nonetheless a secondary spiritual archetype of femaleness emerges militating against the baseness and lewdness of the bodily female archetype.

It is the unquestionable acceptance of a spiritual feminine archetype that binds together those writers who wish to identify the Spirit as in some sense feminine. This holds true for Alwyn Marriage and Naomi Goldenberg but also for Leonardo Boff and the Orthodox writer Fr. Thomas Hopko.¹⁵ Admittedly the archetype is not always conceived in the same way and only Boff of the above writers has tried to link the *theotokos*, womenkind, and the Spirit ontologically. Nevertheless it is the acceptance of a female archetype on the one hand and the belief that this is linked to the Spirit as person on the other hand that creates a family resemblance between these writers.

In the case of Fr. Hopko, whose thesis I shall evaluate a little later on, it is to his credit that he rejects the base and lewd version of femaleness for positive spiritual and human values. Radical feminists will identify, however, Hopko's feminine archetype, which is altruistic, supportive, intuitive, peaceful etc, as designed to ensure that women in society are destined for the wooden spoon. (In fact Hopko's article is an attempt to demonstrate that women are equal to men but distinct in function: this distinctiveness, for him, excludes them from the priesthood).

Hopko suffers like Marriage in convincing us, whether we are radical feminists or not, of the legitimacy of the spiritual feminine archetype (or the masculine archetype for that matter). Empirically most neurological investigations of men and women recognise only minor differences in intelligence and aptitude. Cross-cultural studies demonstrate that the givenness of biological distinction between the sexes does not match gender roles in any isomorphic way.

In anthropology it is clear that to talk of feminine and masculine is to talk of a cluster of attributes archetypically understood but scattered throughout the human population both male and female. This is somewhat analogous to the fact that no one human race contains unique blood groups that can not be found in all races.¹⁶

Typically, however, empirical counter-evidence does not seem to cut much ice with archetypal thinking whether it comes in neo-Platonic forms (such as Hopko's and Marriage's), Jungian depth psychology, or Husserlian pure consciousness. Such evidence is always put down as distortion, perversion, atypicality, or merely surface evidence. This is not to say that there are no deep structures (of language for example) or transcendental realities beyond sense data, but it is to say that in the case of feminine archetypes we should at least posit the

possibility that they are social constructions and culturally determined realities.

To depict the so-called feminine attributes as having their ultimate identity in God the Holy Spirit may satisfy a Christianised Platonic framework, but it is hardly commensurate with the Biblical witness. As we have already seen (see note 10) the Holy Spirit may be Comforter and facilitator of relationships, but the Spirit is also lord, creator, mover, overshadower, baptiser. Conversely, the kenosis of the Son both in terms of the 'divine condescension' of the Logos and Jesus' road to Calvary can not be read off as an iconic faithfulness to some archetypal notion of divine maleness.

And yet as problematic as the role of archetypes may be in linking women with the Spirit, the real difficulty lies elsewhere. The question is this: how is the ontological link to be made between the Spirit as person (yet functionally conceived as the *vinculum amoris*) and womenkind? Alwyn Marriage in her book *Life-giving Spirit* is not altogether clear about this, but Fr Hopko is. Whilst he would not wish to be called a feminist, even of a conservative kind, his methodology is designed precisely to show that there is a symmetry between woman-kind and the Spirit of God. Let us see if he succeeds.

Hopko presents his view of the Holy Spirit as Orthodox, and he disavows any association with sophiology for he rightly sees that any identity between Wisdom and Spirit has a bias towards gnosticism. Hopko also insists, though only in a footnote, that there is 'nothing "feminine" in divinity, as there is nothing "masculine"'. Divinity is beyond sexuality as it is "beyond being" itself'.¹⁷ Having espoused apophaticism, however, Hopko then goes on to say a great deal about sexuality in the Godhead, but in a most curious way.

The Father in Hopko's schema follows the Cappadocian tradition in being not only *primus inter pares*, but also the source, or cause, of the Trinity. But in his essay, unlike the tradition, the Father is strangely absent as a person. He is rather like Irenaeus' Father whose two arms comprise the Son and Spirit, except for the fact that Hopko's Father has little function other than to be the trunk that holds them together. (I am not suggesting for a moment that Hopko has an inadequate doctrine of God; only that in *this* essay God as Father is of no great consequence to his argument).

I am sure that Hopko believes that neither the Father nor the Son can be said to be male in their eternal persons any more than the Spirit can be said to be of the feminine gender.¹⁸ I assume he believes that gender is an inappropriate concept for divine persons.¹⁹ Nevertheless what he does is this: leaving the Father as an androgynous but all pervading backdrop he brings into focus the Son and Spirit. He says that there is 'a direct analogical, symbolic and epiphanic relationship between Adam and the Son of God, and between Eve and the Spirit of God...'²⁰

He is not talking about an isomorphic equivalence between Son/Adam and Spirit/Eve as historical hypostases. He means that there is an interplay, a synergy, an epiphany — to use his own word — between the divine persons of Son and Spirit and male and female nature.

The equivalence between divine persons and created natures is a fundamental category mistake on which the whole of Hopko's thesis falls. The coherence of the Trinity in

Orthodox theology is the *perichoresis* of persons unified by love as one being. Or as John Zizioulas puts it their 'being is communion'.²¹ There are no complementary natures that coinhere in Trinity. To suggest that created human natures reflect the coinherence of uncreated divine personhood is meaningless.

The *imago dei* in humankind is not a reflection of divine personhood mediated through created nature unless created natures shares in divine personhood. To put it less aphoristically and tautologically: you cannot read off human natures from divine persons if you are going to employ a patristic taxonomy of *hypostasis*, *ousia*, and *physis*. In short to claim that male nature reflects eternal sonship or that female nature bears an epiphanic relationship to the Spirit as feminine archetype is not warranted by patristic methodology.

But Hopko's thesis does not stop there. Having told us that there is no sex in the Trinity but that there is an epiphanic relationship between divine Son/masculine nature and divine Spirit/feminine nature he goes on to tell us 'there is a taxis in the divine Trinity according to traditional orthodox theology — an order, and one might even say a hierarchy, if one does not interpret this as some sort of ontological and essential "subordinationism" — so there is a taxis in humanity, an order and hierarchy.'²²

There are two things here. First, as we have already seen, you can not equate a taxis of divine persons with a hierarchical order of created nature so that maleness is to be given greater honour over femaleness. To risk repetition *ad nauseam*: person and nature are not equivalent categories in patristic thought.²³

Second, non-essential subordinationism in the Trinity can not mean a descending order of Father, Son and Holy Ghost in the sense that the Spirit willingly self effaces herself before the Son in the proper and unique sense that the Son willingly submits to the Father's will. At its crudest Hopko's model begins to look like patriarchal father, dutiful son, and submissive daughter who also defers to her brother. It is perfectly proper to say that the Spirit does eternally defer to the Son, but then so do all the divine persons defer to each other in mutual reciprocity.

It is not Hopko's intention, but through his identification of the Spirit archetypically as the discreet and veiled hand-maiden the Trinity begins to take on an ominous lopsidedness. The Spirit, as person, is hemmed in, cramped, and fleeting like an eternal Cinderella. Functionally, though not ontologically, the Spirit begins to fade into the background, like a good servant girl, which is precisely what the filioque achieved for the western tradition.

Fr. Hopko does not mention it but the ancient order of deaconesses would appear to come to his support for the women deacons were declared to be the icons of the Holy Spirit. This, however, begs more questions than it answers. Was it womanhood that was iconic, or lay personhood? If it was the former this falls into the category mistake already discussed in this paper. If the latter then presumably both men and women could be icons of the Spirit. (Can only men be icons of the Son?) Suffice it to say that it is clear from the Apostolic Constitutions of the fourth century that the order of deaconesses came into existence as a measure of economy and it has not been normative in the Eastern Orthodox churches since the early middle ages.²⁴

The purpose of this brief paper has been to examine some of the attempts to identify the Holy Spirit as archetypically feminine and which then try to read this 'femininity' into womankind. I have attempted to show that the adoption of the altruistic feminine archetype has the merit of seeing positive spiritual value in women's lives, but the demerit of disenfranchising women from positions of power and authority. This is analogous to Auguste Comte's attempt in his now forgotten Positivist Religion of Humanity to award women the highest honour in terms of spiritual deveopment (remembering that it was Comte who coined the word, altruism) but refusing them any place in either the market place or the academy.

For the romantic and conservative feminist the problem exemplified by Hopko's work is that even if it were possible to identify in some way the Spirit as feminine you can not adequately show, either ontologically or analogously, how the taxis of divine personhood equates to a hierarchy of human natures or to a distinctive complementarity of the sexes.

Footnotes

- 1 This paper was originally read to a seminar group on the 26th September 1990 in the short paper section of the Trinity Conference organised by the Institute of Systematic Theology, King's College, London.
- 2 D. Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford (1990).
- 3 S Coakley, 'Creaturehood before God: Male and Female', *Theology* (Sept/Oct 1990) pp. 343 ff.
- 4 A. Marriage, *Life-giving Spirit: Responding to the Feminine in God*, SPCK, London (1989)
- 5 M. Suchocki, *God, Christ and Church*, Crossroads, New York (1986).
- 6 R. Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk. Towards a Feminist Theology*, SCM, London (1983), chap 4.
- 7 Though it must be stressed that Ruether's romanticism is to be understood negatively and is in no sense related to the Romantic movement which would be more sympathetic to the intuitive and the feminine archetype.
- 8 M Daley, *Beyond God the Father*, Beacon Press, Boston, (1985).
- 9 Included in comments sent (undated) to the B.C.C.'s draft of the study guide on the Trinity.
- 10 Suffice it to say that it suffers similar problems to those reformist approaches which seek to replace persons with functions. In many of our liturgies today it has become commonplace to replace Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. This schema is not only overtly modalistic, which in itself is common enough in the western theological tradition, but it fails on a basic level of biblical adequacy. To say for example that the Spirit is sustainer is hardly a comprehensive description of attributes or economic functions. Is not the Spirit the Lord and giver of life, the mover upon the waters, the one who overshadows the maiden of Israel, endows Jesus with power, raises him from the dead, and baptises the church with fire?
- 11 Two useful surveys on attitudes to women in the early church are Peter Brown, *The Body And Society*, Faber & Faber, London (1990), and Elizabeth Clark's, *Women In The Early Church*, Michael Glazier, Delaware (1983).
- 12 See her remarks in *Theology*, Sept/Oct 1990, pp.349-350. Nyssa's view is coloured by his Platonism whereby the divine image can not be seen in any corporeal sense. More positively, unlike Augustine, Nyssa sees nothing intrinsically wrong with the natural passion of sexual intercourse.
- 13 Quoted in Elizabeth Clark's *Women In The Early Church*, p 39.
- 14 The identification of women's spirituality with intuition, caring and altruism, helped facilitate, I suspect, the idea that women could be icons of the Spirit who is Comforter, the go-between Father & Son (*vinculum amoris*).
- 15 Alwyn Marriage, *Life-giving Spirit*, Naomi R. Goldenberg, 'Dreams and Fantasies as Sources of Revelation: Feminist Appropriation of Jung', Carol P. Christ & Judith Plaskow (eds), *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, Harper & Row, San Francisco (1979), Leonardo Boff, *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and its Religious Expressions*, Harper & Row, San Francisco (1979), T. Hopko, 'On the Male Character of Christian

Priesthood, K Ware, G. Barrois, T Hopko (eds), *Women and the Priesthood*, St Vladimir's press, New York (1982)

- 16 Though admittedly there are distinct clusterings and oddities. For example the people with the most similar bloodgroups to Great Britain - in terms of statistical scatter - are the Aborigines of Australia.
- 17 'On the Male Character of Christian Priesthood', note 14, p.108.
- 18 Cf the B.C.C. study guide, *The Forgotten Trinity*, where page 32 states, 'To project maleness into the Trinity is a dangerous and ultimately a blasphemous exercise'. British Council of Churches, London (1989)
- 19 It can not be said that the Father is male in the usual anthropomorphic sense. He is called 'father' in the tradition because Jesus calls him father and this scriptural warrant for the relationship is theologically reinforced by the fact that we are all, men and women who 'have put on Christ', the *totus Christus*.
- 20 'On the Male Character of Christian Priesthood', p.106
- 21 John D. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*, Darton Longman & Todd, London (1985)
- 22 'On the Male Character of Christian Priesthood', p.123
- 23 It is surely the great achievement of the Cappadocians that they pioneered the usage of *hypostasis* as a distinct reality in contradistinction to its earlier usage as a virtual synonym for *ousia*. (This was made necessary because of the conceptual inadequacy of the dramaturgical *protospon*)
- 24 See Elizabeth Clark's book, *Women In the Early Church*, chapter four