



Tambourines to the Glory of God: From the Monarchy of God the Father to the Monotheism of God the Great Mysterious

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Feminist theology is shaking the foundations of faith, and nowhere is this more evident than in our understandings of and speech about God. Before the critiques of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mary Daly, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, Father was commonly assumed as the dominant or even exclusive term for God. Now, openly challenged by Goddess, God/ess, Mother, Friend, Spirit, the Color Purple, as well as a host of others, Father has been dislodged from its previously unquestioned position of privilege. This loss of naiveté in our God-language is cause not for lament but rejoicing, for in requiring arguments rather than assertions it encourages all of us to reflect more carefully and critically on the grounds of our faith. Not only those who wish to offer alternative images and concepts for God, but also those who wish to retain the monarchy of God as Father (by which I mean simply the belief that one image of Father should rule in the domain of God-language, either as the exclusive or the dominant image) must now provide reasons for their positions.

In the following essay I shall argue that the embarrassment of riches we are now experiencing in our God-language is a welcome change from the previous monarchy of God as Father for two distinct reasons. First, the expanding fund of imagery aids in the apologetic task by enabling us to speak meaningfully and persuasively to those outside *and* those within Christian communities who find "Father" empty or offensive. Second, the new-found wealth of conflicting imagery aids in the kerygmatic task by exposing the limits of all images for God, including that of Father, and thereby deepening our awareness of the complex reality of the one God. In other words, the debate over appropriate language for God is an opportunity to move beyond a dead faith based on the preservation of the past, the monarchy of God as Father, to a vital faith grounded in a recovery and discovery of the living God of radical monotheism.

In what follows I shall elaborate both of these reasons, emphasizing the latter. In the first section I shall comment on the urgent need and obligation we

have to develop a persuasive God-language beyond the limits of God the Father. In the next two sections I shall argue that a God-language based on the exclusive or dominant rule of the image of Father inadequately bears witness to the God known to us both as Life Dwelling in the Many and the One Who Dwells in Glory. Finally, I shall suggest that a theology of radical monotheism equally stressing both immanence and transcendence is more adequately expressed by a phrase such as 'God the Great Mysterious.'

Until recently, most Christian feminists have relied on scriptural authority to critique and

expand our God-language. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's *Divine Feminine*, which amasses the wealth of biblical female imagery for God in an attempt to establish authoritative precedents, is one of the better known examples of this.¹ While this approach has proved useful in generating "new" images, it is not by itself sufficient to counter the monarchy of God as Father or to point the way forward. Clyde Holbrook's fine exposition of the rich array of competing and often conflicting scriptural images for God, *The Iconoclastic Deity*, underscores the point that the Scriptures cannot be used as a blueprint for fashioning a new orthodox set of images.² Other arguments and criteria are necessary if we are to move beyond the present statement in the debate over which images are "more biblical" and therefore to be recommended. Sallie McFague's linguistic argument against Father in *Metaphorical Theology*, Rosemary Radford Ruether's argument for the *kenosis* of the Father, and Dorothee Soelle's argument for a religion of solidarity beyond the authoritarianism of a Father God are all steps in this direction.³ The following theological argument based on radical monotheism is intended as a contribution in this same direction.

I. THE APOLOGETIC TASK

In their single-minded pursuit of the task of proclaiming the truth with faithfulness many current defenders of the monarchy of the image of God as Father seem to have lost sight of the necessary corollary to this task: proclaiming the truth with power. This is a serious oversight. If we insist on naming God Father, we will be tempted to judge those who cannot or will not call God Father as heretics or atheists. If we persist in relying totally or chiefly on the image of Father, we will surely throw unnecessary stumbling blocks in the path of those who find this image meaningless or offensive. If we do not find ways to communicate the truth persuasively, we are sure to contribute to the demise of

¹Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

²Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Iconoclastic Deity: Biblical Images of God* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University, 1984).

³Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward A Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); and Dorothee Soelle, "Paternalistic Religion as Experienced by Women," in *God As Father?*, ed. Johannes-Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx (New York: Seabury, 1981) 69-74; and *Beyond Mere Obedience* (New York: Pilgrim, 1982). McFague suggests 'Friend' (pp. 177-92), Ruether 'Godless' and 'Matrix' (pp. 68-71, 266), and Soelle 'Source of all that is good' and 'life-giving wind' ("Paternalistic Religion," p. 73) as alternatives to Father.

Christianity as a viable religious option. A comparison with a similar situation in the last century may be helpful here.

In the nineteenth century many people could not accept either the miracle-working, punishing God of Christian orthodoxy or the distant, indifferent God of Deism. They concluded, with no argument from the orthodox, that they must be atheists. The Reformed theologian Schleiermacher had another explanation. He observed that though many not only profess themselves opposed to any belief in God but suppose they really are, in reality they were only rebelling against the conventional presentations of it and had by no means succeeded in destroying all the spiritual affections that rest on consciousness of God.⁴ Convinced that these

people suffered not from insufficient piety but a lack of viable and relevant ways to articulate their experiences of God, he struggled to find a God-language beyond the limits of outmoded belief.

Just as Schleiermacher's new and persuasive expressions of the experienced reality of God in his day enabled Christianity to remain a vital option, so our attempts to find a meaningful language beyond the limits of God the Father may remove some of the current obstacles to an authentic life of faith. The widespread cultural rejection of a God made in the image of the white middle class male is summed up in the already classic sentence of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. As Shug Avery explains to her friend Celie, "When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest."⁵ To the many Shugs in our world a theology based on the monarchy of God as Father is a great obstacle to spirituality, since it suggests that in rejecting the traditional image one is necessarily rejecting God.

If we ignore the experience of those who are alienated from and by God as Father and spend our time reasserting the necessity of the image of Father or inventing new arguments for its exclusivity or hegemony, we will contribute to the drift of Christianity into meaninglessness and reinforce its use as a means of exploitation. Rather than declare all Shugs heretics or atheists, we should respond with the apologetic wisdom of Shug herself. Like Schleiermacher, Shug does not interpret her professed rejection of the conventional image of God as proof of her atheism or spiritual deprivation. Instead, a woman of deep piety, she seeks for more meaningful and life-giving ways to imagine the God she knows is present all around her. Her own success enables her to persuade Celie, who has given up on God, that God is better grasped as joyful and undeserved surprise (the Color Purple) than predictable abuse (Father). Her help in revitalizing Celie's spirituality is a testimony to her ability to speak the truth with power.

How may we better speak the truth with power to our neighbors? By listening to the experiences of God, negative and positive, of all kinds of women, women of color, white women, poor women, rich women, victims of abuse, mothers, artists, gay and straight women, Christian and non-Christian women. If we do, we are sure to discover a broader, more useable set of images

⁴Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928; reprinted, 1968) Part 33, pp. 135-36.

⁵Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square, 1982) 177.

than that offered by the theology of a monarchy of God as Father. Once again an example from the nineteenth century may be helpful.

In her provocative essay *His Religion and Hers*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman has constructed a liberating view of God grounded in women's experience. Decrying the dominating God of death that she believed to be the product of the male experience of war and strife, she poses the question of what thought of God would arise from women's experience of fertility, education, nurture, and production (i.e., cooking and basket-making). Her answer? "Life-everlasting," life which comes in installments, not all at once, and which comes unfinished and therefore in need of care. In short, God is "a power promoting endless growth."⁶ This method leads her to recast the classical question of God as First Cause in a refreshing way that generates an alternate set of images.

“What does it all? What is behind it all? Who is the first Mother, Teacher, Server, Maker? What Power under all this pouring flood of Life? What Love behind this ceaseless mother-love? What Goodness to make Life so good, so full of growing joy?”⁷

“Thus,” she concludes, “would the woman’s mind have reached the thought of God.”⁸

I do not wish to advocate the adoption of Gilman’s specific conception or set of images of God as much as recommend her general approach to the question of God-language. Though her idea of God as “a power promoting endless growth” is far too naively optimistic for a post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima world, her open and empirical method may still be instructive as we pursue an apologetic task today. We must take seriously the variety of experiences of God that occur in the diverse contexts of our world and adjust our imagery to reflect this variety publically. In both theology and worship we need to incorporate images and image-concepts such as Divine Companion, Holy One, Liberator, Beloved, Mother, Grandmother, Friend, Teacher, Goddess, Definer of the Path, Our Heart’s Delight, the Color Purple, as well as others that will continue to arise out of different communities. If we do, we may succeed in speaking the truth with power to those hungry for spiritual meaning in their lives.

In emphasizing the need to use a variety of images of God I differ with both the position of the post-Christian theologian Carol Christ and that of the Christian reformer Diane Tennis. Christ argues for the use of the symbol and term Goddess in addition to Mother and God-She because it more clearly legitimates female power and autonomy, bodily experiences, will, and bonding.⁹ While I agree that Goddess has immense positive power for women and should be used, I believe we need to be careful to use it as only one among a wide variety of terms rather than as the exclusive or primary expression for the divine reality. In other words, the apologetic limitations of substituting a monarchy of the Goddess for the monarchy of the Father must be faced as we add this term to our vocabulary.

⁶Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *His Religion and Hers* (New York: Century, 1923) 247.

⁷*Ibid.*, 251.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Carol Christ, “Symbols of Goddess and God in Feminist Theology,” in *The Book of the Goddess*, ed. Carl Olson (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 248-49.

I disagree much more strongly with Diane Tennis who argues that, although other images may be used for God, we should not relinquish Father. Rather, we should *insist* upon its use as a liberating image, for in the image of God as Father are revealed the divine tenderness, availability, and reliability that critique all our human notions and experiences of fathers and men.¹⁰ While I do not doubt that the image of Father can and should be reinterpreted, I am not convinced that this is the best way to respond to the current situation. Since it is so difficult to shake off the weight of the long-standing oppressive interpretation of God as Father, I fear that any reinterpretation, no matter how accurate, will be unable to speak persuasively and forcefully. For this reason I suggest that rather than reinterpreting or rejecting the image of Father, we call for a moratorium on its use and seize the opportunity to develop and expand our God-language

skills in new directions. If we do this, we are more likely to complete the apologetic task effectively.

Though apologetic considerations may provide us with a sense of urgency, inspiring us to work together to discover and develop new public images “beyond God the Father,” they are not by themselves adequate to justify or direct a move beyond the monarchy of God as Father to a monotheism of God the Great Mysterious. For this we need to consider also what I am calling “kerygmatic” reasons, reasons having to do more with our obligation to bear faithful witness to the complex reality of *God* than with our obligation to speak meaningfully to various human *experiences* of God.

II. LIFE DWELLING IN THE MANY

I use the phrase ‘Life Dwelling in the Many’ to point to the truth of our experience of finding God everywhere in the universe. Classically referred to as the immanence of God, this doctrine underlines the omnipresence of God, or the unlimited scope of God’s revelation, and the nearness of God to all things. One of the most significant contributions of feminist theology is its stress upon this aspect of the doctrine of God. Post-Christian and Christian feminists agree in their insistence that God is manifested in all things—rocks, trees, water, storms, grief, joy, oneself, other persons, other animals, and political events, as well as in scriptures, sacraments, and other traditionally designated loci of revelation. The natural world and the interpersonal/personal life are two of the most common areas emphasized. The comment of one young woman from a farm in South Dakota, “I saw God in the eyes of a calf,” is just one example of the growing awareness among feminists of the presence of God in nature. The fact that Ntozake Shange’s sentence—“I found god in myself/and I loved her fiercely”—is so widely quoted indicates the growing recognition of the presence of God in the personal world.¹¹ Walker’s Shug sums up the widespread feminist acknowledgement of the immanence of God this way: “I believe God is everything....Everything that is or ever was or ever will be.”¹²

¹⁰Diane Tennis, *Is God the Only Reliable Father?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

¹¹Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Macmillan, 1975) 51.

¹²A. Walker, *The Color Purple*, 178.

What feminist theology has yet to do to complete its emphasis on the immanence of God is to stress the omniactivity of God, the unlimited variety of ways God is related to all events of the universe. Just as there is no place in which God is not present, so there is no event in which God is not active in some way, though the form of the activity may vary as greatly as the way of being present. In some situations God is active in creating, providing, sustaining, and preserving life, enabling us to grow. In some, God is active in governing, ordering life by making demands upon us and setting limits. In others, God is active in judging, bearing down upon us with the consequential force of our sinful acts. In others, God is active in liberating, unexpectedly and swiftly reversing evil conditions. In still others, God is active in redeeming, healing, reconciling, forgiving. And in still others, God is active in renewing, comforting, instilling hope and a sense of possibility, surprising us with joy. There are undoubtedly other ways we experience God as active in the universe. The point is that the activity of God in the world is so varied that we dare

not set arbitrary limits on it by defining the functions of God too narrowly. With this in mind, Mary Daly's early suggestion that God be spoken of as the "Verb of verbs" that has "no object to limit its dynamism"¹³ still has much to recommend it.

Feminist theology's stress on God's omnipresence and omniactivity points the way to a much needed recovery of the truth of radical immanence that lies at the heart of Judaism's and Christianity's faith in the one God. The radicality of that immanence is suggested by Martin Buber's arresting interpretation of the voice of God that Moses heard from the burning bush, traditionally translated as "I Am Who I Am": "I shall be present" or "I shall be there" (Exod 3:14).¹⁴ In this promise God reveals a care for creation that knows no bounds. If God were not able to be present in all places and active in all events, Moses would not have heard a promise to be "there" (everywhere and anywhere), but an arrangement to meet him only at well-defined times and places.

Though there is no hint that the "there" of God's promise is limited in any way except by the faithfulness of the hearers, later generations attempted to narrow the scope of God's presence by limiting sacred space, the place where one could meet God, to a particular place or time—the temple or Jesus, for example. From time to time reform movements arose, both prophetic and mystical, to challenge this unwarranted restriction of God and open up the infinitely vast realm of God's presence and activity once again. These movements were usually critiques of particular idolatries and calls for a return to the purer faith of radical monotheism.¹⁵ Feminist theology's radicalizing of the omnipresence of God is one such reform movement today. Its criticism of the idolatry of God as Father reminds us of the dangers of determining "Lo, God is here and *not* there. Lo, God acts like this and *not* like that," by pointing out the way the established determinate places and ways for meeting God have excluded women and other

¹³Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward A Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973) 34.

¹⁴Martin Buber, *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies* (New York: Schocken, 1982) 59-60.

¹⁵Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: The Heart of Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 195-205.

marginalized peoples. In doing so, it calls us to greater attentiveness to, gratitude for, and trust in God as Life Dwelling in the Many.

The feminist widening of sacred space has several implications for theology and worship. First, it calls for an expansion of the number of images we use for God, in order that we may accurately bear witness to the immense variety of places and ways we experience God as present and active in the world. Conversely, it calls for an end to the dominant or exclusive use of Father, since no one image, no matter what it is—father, mother, light, or friend—is rich enough to evoke the multiple presence and multifarious activity of the God who promises "I shall be there." Speaking of God *only* as Father may be the result of longstanding habit, the desire to reserve the sacred for an elite, or simply the lack of a powerfully disclosive alternative. Whatever the motivation, its narrowing of sacred space indicates an inattentiveness or indifference to the complex reality of the omnipresent and omniactive God and thus a departure from a radical monotheism that affirms God as the Life Dwelling in the Many.

Second, the stress on the immanence of God calls for great care in the expansion of the

number of our images to include a wide range or variety of images. Though it may be helpful and appropriate to address God as Mother or Friend as well as or instead of Father, for instance, it is not sufficient. Images drawn from human life are clearly some of the most accessible ones to us, and they are necessary to a full disclosure of the complex reality of God. Though rich, they are not adequate and therefore they must be complemented by images taken from other areas of our experience, such as the natural and inanimate worlds.

If we use personal images for God exclusively or primarily, we will be tempted to slide into an uncritical anthropomorphism (conceiving of God in the image of human beings). We will be more easily led to assume that God is a person, a singular personality just like each of ourselves, with the same traits and capacities. If we speak of God as Wind, Rain, River, or Mountain as well as Grandmother or Friend, we may be reminded that, though personal, God is not a person or even a being. Rather, God is the One Who Causes to Be,¹⁶ the source and sustainer of all life.

Because of our stubborn tendency to think of God as a person and to emphasize the personal to the neglect of the natural and inanimate dimensions of life, I would like to offer several suggestions for the expansion of the range of our images. First, I suggest we follow the lead of mystics, Native Americans, and Goddess theologians and increase the number of God-images we draw from nature. Tree of Life, Fire, Hurricane, Wellspring, and Rock are a few that may

¹⁶Samuel Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 223; original reads "He Who Causes To Be." In arguing against an *uncritical* anthropomorphism and for the expansion of our use of nonpersonal images I am not implying that all personal language for God should be rejected. I agree with Rita Gross that the theism of Judaism (and Christianity) "requires anthropomorphism" and that this imagery should be female and male; see her essay, "Female God Language in a Jewish Context," *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 168. This imagery, however, can never be sufficient to point to the "more than personal" God.

serve as evocative images for the complex reality of God.¹⁷ Second, I suggest we consider adopting the habit of certain tribes in Africa and refer to God as 'It' in order to honor God as a reality larger than and distinct from the rest of the world, which can be designated as female or male.¹⁸ If God is indeed not a person, neither male nor female, but the power by which and in which all exists, there is no reason for us not to add the impersonal pronoun to 'He' and 'She' as an appropriate way to refer to God. Though the oddity of this expression may appear to be an obstacle, it may in fact function as an aid. Like the term 'Goddess,' 'It' is so strange that it may jar loose our conventional assumptions about God, leaving room for us to respond to the Life Dwelling in the Many in new ways.¹⁹

III. THE ONE WHO DWELLS IN GLORY

I use the phrase 'the One Who Dwells in Glory' to point to the truth of our experience of never being able to grasp God. Classically referred to as the transcendence of God, this doctrine emphasizes the immense distinction between God and the rest of the world. Transcendence has had quite a different fate in feminist theology than immanence. Most feminists are suspicious of any teaching of God as 'Wholly Other,' since this has been used to keep women in their place.²⁰ When God as 'Wholly Other' is combined with an assumption of God's maleness, there is no

doubt that it functions to oppress women, and it is rightfully dismissed. I do not believe, however, that the furtherance of the equality and dignity of women requires an absolute rejection of the otherness of God. Rather, it requires a radicalizing of God's otherness.

By radicalizing the otherness of God I do not mean an intensification of the transcendence associated with hierarchical theologies, in which God is essentially either separate from the world, choosing to descend upon it at well-defined points, or antagonistic to it, requiring all who would be like God to be anticreation. Instead I have in mind a renewed emphasis on the transcending God that

¹⁷Three additional benefits of using images drawn from nature may be noted: (1) countering oppression and domination, as stressed in Dorothee Soelle's remark that "symbols taken from nature are...much clearer because they are innocent of any authoritarian implication" ("Paternalistic Religion," p. 73; see also her "Mysticism, Liberation, and the Names for God," *Christianity and Crisis* 41 [June 22, 1981] 179-85); (2) recalling our attention to nature as a force to be reckoned with rather than matter to be dominated; and (3) helping to break the stalemate in the debate over the use of all male, all female, or male and female images for God.

¹⁸As used here, 'It' is equivalent not to the 'It' but to the 'Thou' of Martin Buber in *I and Thou* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1970).

¹⁹For a discussion of the positive, shattering, and disclosive power of the term 'Goddess' for Christian feminists, see Nelle Morton, "The Goddess As Metaphoric Image," *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon, 1985) 147-75.

²⁰See Beverly Wildung Harrison, "Keeping Faith in a Sexist Church," *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon, 1985) 227-29. In contrast to the general feminist tendency to neglect or reject the transcendence of God, Rosemary Radford Ruether has called attention to the need to retain it *in some form* ("Goddesses and Witches: Liberation and Countercultural Feminism," *Christian Century* 97 [Sept. 10, 1980] 846) and Nelle Morton has suggested a feminist reinterpretation of transcendence ("A Word We Cannot Yet Speak," *The Journey Is Home*, 86-101).

rises up out of our awareness of ourselves as frail and finite, dependent creatures pushing up against the limits of a reality that is powerful, incomprehensible, and uncontrollable; out of our recognition that the reality we call God is unfathomable, impenetrable, unreachable, existing beyond all our imagings, desires, needs, hopes, feelings, thoughts, actions, and expectations; out of our acknowledgement that the Life Dwelling in the Many that is ever near to us and heedful of us is also the One Who Dwells in Glory that is inaccessible to us.

This experience also lies at the heart of Judaism and Christianity. The Scriptures abound in language that attempts to convey this sense of God as mystery: the Holy One, the One Who Dwells in Deep Darkness, the One of Inapproachable Light, the Inaccessible One, the Glorious One, the One Whose Ways Are Unsearchable. It is perhaps best conveyed by the answer Moses hears in the bush when he asks what he should call God: "the One, the Unnameable."²¹ To those who lived in a culture in which naming something meant having power over it, this could only be heard as a warning. The Voice says, "I am the One Who Will Not Be Manipulated, the Uncontrollable One."

The only proper responses to the God who declares itself the Unnameable are silent awe and spontaneous praise that bursts the bounds of speech. It is this silent awe that the Jewish prohibition against uttering God's name and the custom of using the tetragrammaton seek to cultivate. It is this awe that Job displays when he says to the Voice in the Whirlwind, "I retract all I have said; in dust and ashes I repent" (Job 42:6). It is this spontaneous praise that makes the

angels sing “glory to God in the highest” (Luke 2:14) and black gospel singers shout

Tambourines!
Tambourines!
Tambourines!
To the glory of God!
Tambourines!
To glory!

A gospel shout
and a gospel song:
Life is short
But God is long!

Tambourines!
Tambourines!
Tambourines!
To glory!²²

We need to recover this radical awareness of the glory of the Unnameable One and reject all names for God, that is, any titles that presume upon the existence of God by seeking to reduce God to the limits of one’s own needs or ability to control. Harold Oliver describes this need by saying that “[t]he problem is not—as the feminists often say—one of the inadequacy of *certain* nouns/

²¹M. Buber, *On the Bible*, 54-58.

²²Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) 29; emphasis in original.

names, but of the inadequacy of *any* naming of the deity.”²³ His suggestion that this may lead to a greater appreciation of the apophatic tradition (e.g., Eastern Orthodoxy) and the Hindu teaching that “[a]ll things named and nameable—even the gods—are creatures,”²⁴ is a welcome one. In recovering this emphasis in our tradition and acknowledging it in other traditions, we may deepen our awareness of this truth. For example, the radical understanding of the glory of God in certain Native American tribes, represented by the following quotation from the artist Carl Gorman, can be a helpful reminder to us not to domesticate God.

It has been said by some researchers into Navajo religion, that we have no Supreme God, because He is not named. That is not so. The Supreme Being is not named because He is unknowable. He is simply the Unknown Power.²⁵

As is evident from my argument above for the centrality of the incomprehensible glory of God, I disagree with Oliver that the Hindu teaching of God’s unnameability “constitutes a fundamental difference from both Judaism and Christianity.”²⁶ I do agree, however, that it “may prove to be a hard but necessary truth for the West to accept.”²⁷ Given our proclivity toward

reining God in to achieve better control of our world or greater ease of access to the sacred, it is not likely that we will hear any shouts of “Tambourines to Glory!” easily. It is for this reason that feminist theology, as a reform movement exposing an idolatrous theology, must continue to insist on the unnameability of The One Who Dwells in Glory.²⁸

Those who claim Father as *the* title or *the* divinely revealed name of God, according to a special status beyond that of all “humanly constructed” images, would do well to remember the warning of the fiery bush that God is the Unnameable One, the Uncontrollable One. Unless one keeps this in mind, the use of Father as the name for God is blasphemy. Feminists also, as we learn the creative power of naming *ourselves*, and the freedom to control our own lives, would do well to remember that this emerging power is not directly applicable to our relationship to God, the Uncontrollable One. As we expose the oppressing power of naming God as Father and experience the liberating power of using new images for God, we must not lose sight of the Unnameable One, who demands to be met not with this or that proper name or title, but with silent awe and spontaneous praise.

It is for this reason that I am opposed to any name or title for God, including Mother, and instead favor the use of a variety of images for God. Images have the power not to control but only to point to or evoke an awareness of God,

²³Harold H. Oliver, “Beyond the Feminist Critique: A Shaking of the Foundations,” *Christian Century* 102 (May 1, 1985) 446; emphasis in original.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵As quoted in Joseph Epes Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 70.

²⁶H. Oliver, “Beyond the Feminist Critique,” 446.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸See, for example, Naomi Goldenberg, *The End of God: Important Directions for a Feminist Critique of Religion in the Works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 1982) 63.

and as such are a more appropriately humble form of speech for the One Who Dwells in Glory. If God is not a thing to be described but a limit we experience, every image will distract us away from as well as point us toward that reality. This dual character of images is reflected in Shug’s conversation with Celie also. Having told Celie that “God ain’t a he or a she, but a it,” she answers Celie’s next question, “But what do it look like?”, this way: “Don’t look like nothing....It ain’t a picture show. It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else....God is every thing.”²⁹ The recognition that God is both everything and no-thing underscores the point that all images both reveal and conceal.

This recognition of the limits of images alone, however, is no guarantee that we will use them faithfully. There seems to be an inevitable slide from the use of images to enable us to talk about God at all to the worship of those same necessary images as idols. The consistent reappearance of prohibitions against images of God in our records indicates how prevalent this slip is. Exodus 20:4 prohibits all graven (carved or wrought) images. Isaiah 40:25 (“To whom would you liken me? And who would be my equal, says the Holy One of Glory?”) and Isaiah 40:25 (“What image would you contrive of God?”), expand the prohibition to include *all* images. Acts 17:29 (God is not “like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of human beings”) reaffirms the expanded prohibition. Throughout the subsequent history of our

tradition we continue to find reaffirmations of the prohibition (such as in the recurrent definition of sin as idolatry) whenever the community has lost sight of the glory of God in the blinding light of its own image.

It is time once more for such a reaffirmation. Though the incomprehensible glory of God is a familiar enough refrain in our theology, found as commonly in daily discussions (“God is more than we can think or say or feel or show”) as in theologians’ prefaces to the doctrine of God (“The infinite God transcends our finite minds”), its near universal acceptance has not led to faithful responses of piety and worship. Today the glory of God is a doctrine more of our tongues than our hearts and lives, as Calvin might say. Though we proclaim the mystery of a transcending God, in practice we operate with a domesticated god, a god just our size (male), color (white), and style (guarantor of the status quo). While we say God is “beyond sex” and “more than a father,” we act as if ‘he’ is only male or only a father. Rather than struggle with the Glorious One of monotheism, who remains a dark mystery, we comfort ourselves with the familiar monarchy of God as Father, allowing this image to determine the limits of our consciousness of God. In our concern to preserve the tradition of calling God ‘Father’ we have undermined the sense of the awe of God as the Transcending One. Lulled into a complacent and familiar use of ‘Father,’ we have presumed upon the existence of the One Who Will Not Be Limited, who refuses to be contained in our puny caricatures.

The implications of radicalizing our awareness of the incomprehensible glory of God are far-reaching. If we stress that God alone is Absolute, worthy of our devotion, we must recover the truth that *no* image, no matter how true, can

²⁹A. Walker, *The Color Purple*, 178. For an excellent exposition of the dual character of all images and the idolatry of Father, see Sallie McFague’s *Metaphorical Theology*.

stand in place of that Absolute. This is as true of Jesus’ use of Father as it is for any other scripturally sanctioned image. Even if it can be conclusively shown that Jesus set Father above all other images, this would not be sufficient warrant for us to use it exclusively or primarily today. If God is truly the I Will Be Who I Will Be, then none of our attempts to freeze the perplexing, disturbing, and ever-moving living God in one special image will succeed.

The history of the bronze serpent provides a good analogy here. Numbers 21:6-9 records that God commanded Moses to raise up a bronze serpent so that the people could look on it and be saved. 2 Kings 18:4 records that Hezekiah smashed the bronze serpent of Moses, which had *become* an idol and so demonstrated his radical trust in the One God. Is it not the Iconoclastic Deity that we see witnessed to in these two accounts? As Holbrook says of all the images of God in the Scriptures, “God appears as the Iconoclastic One who breaks through them all. He destroys the idolatrous devotion with which we invest them.”³⁰ For this reason we err when we try to freeze the ever-moving, living God in any image, even if that image is commanded by God.

The image of Father is our brazen serpent. Though in Jesus’ day the image was liberating and redemptive, today it is an enslaving and oppressive idol that must be smashed. In our hardening of this image we show our disrespect for and discontent with the perplexing and often disturbing reality of the Living One, who does not cease to move freely in spite of the traps we set for it.

If we can learn this about our beloved image of Father, we may be able to remember that

it is true of all images. The God who says “I will be who I will be, not who I was and who you want me to remain” is the Iconoclastic One. Radicalizing our awareness of God as the One Who Dwells in Glory implies, then, a deep suspicion of *all* images for God as well as a rejection of a name for God. We need to be constantly vigilant in our worship of God, for the slip from piety to blasphemy will be an ever present danger no matter what image or set of images we adopt.

One way to keep us alert to this danger is to expand our range of images, for continual use of a wider variety of images may help us remember that the complex reality of God cannot be contained totally in anyone image. Holbrook’s *Iconoclastic Deity* stresses that it is precisely in the clash of the many and often conflicting scriptural images rather than in one or two chosen images that God is best apprehended. As each limits the others and is limited by the others our thoughts may be directed with greater constancy toward the One Who Dwells in Glory.

IV. TOWARD A RADICAL MONOTHEISM OF GOD THE GREAT MYSTERIOUS

Feminist theology can aid us in the recovery of a radical monotheism by its radicalizing of our sense of awe when up against the One Who Dwells in Glory and our sense of gratitude when met by Life Dwelling in the Many. Both senses are equally fundamental to our experience and equally essential to a

³⁰C. Holbrook, *The Iconoclastic Deity*, 224.

reconstructed theology. If we stress only the variety of God’s presence and God’s nearness to the world, we will be tempted to lose ourselves in an infinity of possibilities. If we stress only the unity of God’s incomprehensible glory and God’s unavailability to us, we will be tempted to lose ourselves in an immobilizing infinite. We must find a way to talk about the One who is never equal to but ever revealed in the Many in the world. A truly radical monotheism depends on it.

This is one of the most difficult tasks we face as theologians, and our histories are full of our attempts. One that failed is the theology of the monarchy of God as Father. In using this image as the ruling image for God, this theology has pressed the variety of God’s presence as Life Dwelling in the Many and God’s unnameable unity as the One Who Dwells in Glory into the service of establishing an exclusive uniformity in communities of faith. In doing so it has moved closer to henotheism or a Unitarianism of the Father than to radical

monotheism. Feminist theology will be in danger of being remembered as a failure also, if it does not find a way beyond its current emphasis on the immanence of God to a theology that incorporates this necessary emphasis in a broader view of God as both immanent and transcending.

If we wish to avoid the exclusive image of Father and a lopsided stress on the immanence of God that excludes all transcendence, what remains? What term or image-concept might we use to bear more faithful witness to the unity of the complex reality of God? Observing the pitfalls of taking only the *via positiva* or the *via negativa* in our search for God, Martin Buber suggests we use the simple and direct phrase “the living God.”

If you explore the life of things and of conditioned being you come to the Unfathomable. If you deny the life of things and conditioned being, you stand before Nothingness. If you hallow this life, you meet the living God.³¹

Holbrook argues for ‘Spirit’ or ‘Iconoclastic Spirit’ as the ruling image for the wide scope of scriptural images because its “multiple and ambiguous nature summons up impressions of power” and “its daily presence reminds the faithful that God is not only the Ancient of Days of the past, but the dynamic contemporary of the present and future.”³² The Lakota and Dakota customarily refer to God as *Wakan-Tanka*, which is translated as Sacred Mystery or Great Mysterious. By this phrase they refer to God as both the source of all and in all *and* that which is greater than all, as Black Elk’s prayer affirms: “Wakan-Tanka, you are everything, and yet above every thing.”³³

Each of these suggestions is helpful as a linguistic reminder of radical monotheism. ‘Living,’ ‘Spirit,’ and ‘Mysterious’ point to the variety of God’s ever-present nearness to creation and call us to prayerful attentiveness and gratitude. ‘God,’ ‘Iconoclastic,’ and ‘Great’ point to the unity of the ever unreachable God and call us to awe and praise. In each case the conjunction of the two suggests the tensive correlation of our experience of God as Life Dwelling in the Many and the One Who Dwells in Glory. This tension is never resolved, not in our Scriptures, our traditions, our theology, our worship, or our lives. Rather, each truth remains to challenge and limit the other, continually urging us onward in the permanent revolution of faith. Such a life, in which we are searching without ceasing for ways to respond faithfully to the Living God, the One in the Many, is a strenuous and demanding one. It is also an abundant life, as St. Bernard of Clairvaux knew. To paraphrase him: If The Great Mysterious is so sweet to those who seek it, what must it be to those who find it?

³¹M. Buber, *I and Thou*, 79.

³²C. Holbrook, *The Iconoclastic Deity*, 223 and 224.

³³As quoted in J. Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy*, 70.