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Christianity and Women in Japan

After a brief introduction to the situation of Christian or church-going women in Japan, this article introduces a feminist theological group, the Center for Feminist Theology and Ministry in Japan, as one of the diverse new feminist movements among Christian women and men. This Center was founded in 2000 for feminists doing theology in the particular context of Japan where only one percent of the population are Christians, where the church has been especially careful to preserve the authentic Christian faith in the midst of a non-Christian culture, and where Christian women feel that they have been offered only second-class citizenship in their faith communities, both ethnically and sexually. In this article I first introduce the Center's basic theological stance, purposes, and programs. Then, as examples of its activities, I offer two of my presentation papers at its seminar gatherings, which are open to the public. One addresses the issue of "God the Father" language in church, and the other offers a new biblical interpretation of Martha, known as an "active kitchen woman," in addressing the issues surrounding women ministers. Both issues are the objects of lively discussion and serious concern among feminist church women today in Japan.

KEYWORDS: Christians in Japan – feminist theology – God the Father – Martha – women in ministry – biblical interpretation

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IN 1990, JAPANESE Christian activist Matsui Yayori greeted the audience at the Fourth International Interdisciplinary Conference of Women in New York with the following words: “I come to you from Japan, not the country of the rising sun but the country of the rising daughters, because Japanese women are breaking out of the stereotypical image of calm, docile women who are happy to serve their menfolk.”¹

Since about 1975, the International Women’s Year, women’s actions have become very visible in Japanese society, especially surrounding the issues of war, peace, nuclear proliferation, the environment, human rights, and equality. However, when it came to women in religious traditions, although they were active in a variety of movements, they were rather slow to stand up for sexual equality. Women had accepted dualistic gender concepts and roles as divinely ordained. Finally, by the end of the twentieth century, more and more women in Christian traditions as well as in other spiritual traditions began questioning such an understanding.

In this paper, after a brief introduction to the situation of Christian women in Japan, I would like to introduce a new feminist theological group, the Center for Feminist Theology and Ministry in Japan (*Nihon feminisuto shingaku/senkyō sentā* 日本フェミニスト神学・宣教センター). Founded in 2000, this Center is one of several diverse new feminist movements among Christian women in our country, but in one sense it is special. While theology has been perceived as being academic and male, this theological Center operates under the leadership of two women, with the supportive collaboration of both women and men, and invites not only theologians but also ordinary women and men to join in theological studies and discussions.

As Co-Director of this Center, I will mention our Center’s basic theological stance, purposes, and programs. Then, as examples of its activities, I will offer two papers that I presented at its seminar gatherings, which are open to the public. One paper addresses the issue of “God the Father” language in church;

1. MATSUI 1991, p. 22. I wish to express my sincere regret over Matsui Yayori’s recent death by cancer on 27 December 2002, at the age of sixty-eight. Her given name, Yayori, derives from the words, “to live according to Jesus,” and she lived her life in such a way to the end, following her favorite biblical verse, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my siblings, you did it to me” (Mt. 25: 40; my translation). To cite just one example, without her commitment we probably could not have held the “Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal 2000 for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery” in Tokyo. Now many women and men are working for the realization of her desire to build a women’s museum of war and peace in Tokyo.

the other addresses issues surrounding women in ministry, offering a new biblical interpretation of the story of Martha, a woman known as an “active kitchen woman.” Both issues are of serious concern among feminist church women today in Japan, and have generated lively discussion.

Christian Women in Japan

Christianity was first introduced to Japan by Western missionaries in the sixteenth century, but was soon banned by the government, which feared political, economic, and spiritual colonization by the West. During two centuries of self-imposed seclusion, the government decided to consolidate a unifying spirituality or ideology for the nation, and propagated Shinto as representing the genuine ancient Japanese spirituality. When Japan opened its doors to the West in the nineteenth century, Christianity was introduced again, giving the impression that Christianity represented Western culture and religion (YAMAGUCHI 1997b, pp. 101–107; 1998, 40–46).

In fact, Christianity in Japan has always been dominated by European (mostly German) elite white male theologies. As a result, church women have long harbored the feeling that they are offered only second class citizenship in our faith communities in terms of both ethnicity and gender. Many women, however, did not know how to express or deal with their questions (YAMAGUCHI, 1997a; 2002a, pp. ix, 142–44).

In church, women are the numerical majority, and women, not men, have always taken most of the responsibility for practical matters in church activities. Many of them are also active leaders and participants in various social movements. Nevertheless, women have remained in the minority in decision-making positions, such as heads of committees and boards, in the church. Moreover, while women are the majority in the active work force, it is not unusual that men are nominated as representatives of many groups and movements, despite their poor participation. This tendency results in women’s invisibility even in today’s church annals, which record only representative names in annual church reports.

Since about 1985, a growing number of church-going women finally began voicing their honest questions at women’s gatherings. It became clear that many women had many questions about ministers’ sermons and Bible studies. A variety of church women’s groups, which crossed the boundaries of church and denominational differences, were born. Women gathered together to study and discuss issues, and to question sexist customs and teachings in church.²

2. There are many books and booklets written and/or published by church women’s groups in Japanese. See ISSHIKI et al. 1991. See CHUN et al. 2000 as an English-language example. At the beginning of my article in this book, after my personal history I state the basis of my commitment in doing feminist theology: “I will deal more generally with Japanese society as a whole, in an effort to provide

Nevertheless, the transformation of the church has proceeded quite slowly. One of the reasons for this was that many of these women had ambivalent feelings toward their own challenges. Many women asked themselves whether it was not presumptuous for lay persons with no theological education to dispute their ministers' messages and biblical interpretations.

In addition, because the authority of the Bible has been unquestioned in churches in Japan, any questioning of the biblical teaching was liable to be interpreted as a lack of faith. Therefore, women (and men) have hesitated to question the biblical texts themselves. Questioning or criticizing biblical interpretations only is acceptable for many church people. The most difficult challenge for the majority of church women (and men) has been critical reading of the Bible, especially the application of a "hermeneutics of suspicion" to biblical texts.³

Furthermore, many women cannot free themselves from the anxiety of going astray into heresy by challenging church traditions or by questioning biblical passages. In Japan, Christians have always been a tiny minority group, comprising only one percent of the whole population. Churches stand in the midst of a non-Christian culture, surrounded by different religious traditions that have a much longer history and larger membership. In this particular context, churches in Japan have always been careful to avoid any sign of syncretism, in order to maintain the "authentic" Christian faith.

In this effort, however, the keeping of the traditional authentic Christian faith has been virtually equated with the strict keeping of the Euro-centric understanding of Christianity that has been taught by Western elite white male theologians. Any challenge or claim to change this tradition was perceived as a potentially dangerous slide toward heresy or syncretism. Thus, women themselves could not help but fear that their challenge to church traditions might jeopardize their faith.⁴

a better basis for understanding my context...the cultural orientation of group harmony, the pervasive gender role system, and a lack of critical commitment.... [Then I offered a brief review of] the history and religion of Japan focusing on women." I am sorry to have to say that this section was completely dropped in the published book; unfortunately, I did not have a chance to proofread my translated and edited article.

3. Recently, however, Elisabeth SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA's articulation of the difference between the absolute, unchangeable "archetype" and the historical, formative "prototype" has been quite helpful in conceptualizing the Bible and church traditions as prototypes, and in encouraging church people to read the Bible both appreciatively and critically, without fear of heresy. For the concepts of archetype and prototype, see SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, 1984, p. 10.

4. Contrary to the notion of a pure and authentic Christian faith, recent biblical studies have found abundant evidence that, throughout their early history, Jewish/Christian traditions were actively syncretistic: Our spiritual ancestors did not hesitate to learn from different spiritual or religious traditions, thus deepening and enriching their understanding of God in their own ways. See YAMAGUCHI 2002a, pp. 39–44 and the references listed there. For other examples, see FRYMER-KENSKY 1992; SMITH 1967; SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA 1975.

However, we Japanese have an oppressive history of political intentional syncretism (See YAMAGUCHI 1998). So, we Japanese women may do well to be wary of such dangerous syncretism on the

Although there are women ministers who received theological education at seminaries, the education they received was centered in conventional European elite white male theology, and did not offer much help for women's struggles in the church in Japan.⁵ Indeed, church women had few tools for developing their theological thinking and for carrying on their challenges to the customs and teachings of a patriarchal church. All of the above made women's struggles in the church very difficult.

In the meantime, outside of the church, there was a growing number of women who felt a spiritual thirst, but were disappointed by the church. They would say, "We were attracted to the teaching in Christianity that there is no male and female before God. But when we participated in church services and activities, we found that the basic church structure is no different than that of society: men speak while women listen, and men make decisions in meeting rooms while women stand in the kitchen." Surely, church-going women are doubly pushed, not only by Japanese culture/society but also by the church, to accept the dualistic gender concept as natural or divinely given. There are few ministers who are sensitized to these "women's" concerns. The church has not been responding to the spiritual thirst of these women either.

Introducing the Center for Feminist Theology and Ministry in Japan

It was at such a time that I had my first encounter with feminist theology. I felt as if I had found an oasis in a desert. I decided to study in the US in order to offer feminist theological support in solidarity with these struggling women in Japan. Ten years quickly flew by. Upon returning to Japan, I shared my desire to establish a feminist theological center with Kinukawa Hisako, who had also studied feminist theology in the US, and we immediately reached a decision to co-found our Center. It was the realization of a dream that each of us had carried in our hearts for more than ten years.⁶

one hand, but be open to conscious learning from different spiritual traditions on the other. There may also be much to learn from our ethnic foremothers' wisdom in their practiced religious pluralism. Such an attitude will help us overcome a dualistic gender perception, as well as a Western-white-male-centered "ethnic" perception, of God. In this way we may deepen our sensitivity to the diverse manifestations of God's creation.

5. In Japan, we do not have comprehensive data regarding women in ministry. Among the United Church of Christ in Japan-related Protestant churches (most Protestant churches in Japan belong to the UCCJ, and I belong to one of these), in 1913 the first woman graduated from a theological seminary and entered into ministry as an assistant; and in 1933 the first woman was formally ordained as a fully qualified minister. In 2002, women comprised about fifteen to sixteen percent of ordained active ministers in Protestant churches. Among Episcopal churches, in 1999 the first ordination of women took place. See MASUDA 2002 and YAMANO 2002.

6. Kinukawa Hisako is the author of *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (KINUKAWA 1994) among other works. See her analysis (pp. 15–22) of Japanese patriarchy, which is the broader context of our struggle.

Our purpose is to participate in the global endeavor to reconstruct Christian traditions from feminist perspectives and from our particular context in Japan, by raising questions from our life experiences, and by listening to the voices of variously marginalized people, especially women. Fortunately, several women and men around us agreed with our purpose, and they became our serving committee members, while Kinukawa and I became co-founders and co-directors of the Center. In January 2000, our Center for Feminist Theology and Ministry in Japan was born.⁷

As we took our first new steps, we established a basic stance that was rooted in three things which we had become painfully aware of through our study of feminist theology. First is the extent to which the theology, Christian teachings, and biblical interpretations of the past have been shaped by the perspectives of western elite white men. Second is the great gap between theology as scholarship and ministry as practiced in the churches. Third is the inappropriateness of approaching sexism as an issue of “women versus men.”

In an effort to respond to these three points, our Center emphasizes and aims for the following three things. First, we will develop theologies that respond to a variety of questions arising from life experiences. Second, we will maintain a stance that connects theology and ministry. Specifically, we will strive to address the issues church women are facing, and to communicate the fruits of theology to the churches, thus bridging the large gap between theology and ministry in ways that make theological scholarship more responsive to issues in ministry and also more accessible to ordinary church-goers. Third, we will foster a perspective that understands discrimination against women as one of multiple oppressions within a patriarchal social structure. We recognize that the human realities of sex/gender are not that of “natural” bipolar oppositions between men and women, but are experienced in many different and changing ways, being inseparably interlocked with the issues of ethnicity, culture, class, and so on.⁸

7. YAMAGUCHI 2000. At first, Kinukawa and I thought of creating a steering committee as the core group of our Center. However, we noticed that the men around us who were willing to support us as active participants were those in leadership roles, such as ministers, theologians, and professors. Therefore we chose the name “serving committee” instead of “steering committee” in order to emphasize the serving attitude and roles rather than the leading ones. It turned out to be a very good idea. It has been four years since then, and the committee members maintain serving attitudes to other members and participants. Fortunately, women and men who are much younger than the original committee members, including those who have not had a theological education, are also joining our committee these days.

8. In terms of ethnicity and culture, various anthropological theories and concepts have recently been adopted in interpreting biblical texts. I am not against such endeavors, and I myself use social scientific information in my approach to biblical texts. However, I question the ways such information is sometimes used in biblical scholarship. For example, many of the anthropological theories used as aids in biblical interpretation are old ones that have been criticized by many in the field. Such theories are modern Western-male-centered dualistic reconstructions that are rather harmful as far

We also understand that “sex” is biological and diverse, not decreed to be polarized as male or female, that “sexuality” is biological and diverse, not ordained to be patriarchal heterosexual, and that “gender” is social/cultural and diverse, not fixed to be dualistic masculine and feminine.⁹ Based on these recognitions, we cultivate a stance that respects diversity, rather than one that deprecates differences among people.

Our basic programs are in four areas. First is the holding of bimonthly workshops. These are open-to-the-public seminars held in Tokyo, and the audience/participants include ordinary women and men, both those within the church and those outside it, as well as those in theological disciplines in Christian and other religious traditions. Second is the publication of Center newsletters, in Japanese and in English, to share seminar lectures with those who are unable to attend, and to exchange information among members. Third is the collection of resource materials. We collect books, journals and papers related to feminist theology, and provide them to those who do not have easy access to these resources. Fourth is networking. We hope to create various feminist networks of communication—national and international, ecumenical and inter-faith, with those in scholarship as well as in social and political grass-roots movements—and to open channels to support women who want to further their studies in feminist theology. We hope to expand our activities in all fields gradually.

In the following, as examples of our Center activities, I will offer two of my seminar presentation papers that address current lively issues among feminist Christians in Japan.

Questioning “God the Father” Language

I would like to begin my talk with a brief explanation of how I approach today’s seminar theme in general,¹⁰ and then focus on the Christian Testament, the

as they re-inscribe their own ethnocentric stereotypical understanding of “ethnic” women and men. See YAMAGUCHI 2002a, p. 11.

9. Some people have questioned whether “sex” and “sexuality” are biological. I understand that the designation and categorization of them are cultural. Here I use the word “biological” in a specific way to mean “biological attributes,” which we should accept without inferring the normality or abnormality, rightness or wrongness of “sex” and “sexuality,” in contrast to “cultural” which implies a judgment by the culture of the time or place. That is, I understand that “sex” or “sexuality” are biological attributes, and we should neither label nor condemn certain forms as “sick” or “distorted,” nor pronounce or classify other forms as “normal” or “natural.” A cultural decision to label a particular sexuality, such as homosexuality, abnormal and heterosexuality normal is just as wrong as one that labels brown eyes abnormal and blue eyes normal.

10. This section was first presented at a seminar on 20 July 2000, and was published as “Divine Metaphors in the Biblical Context: The Christian Testament” in Center for Feminist Theology and Ministry in Japan Newsletter 4 (in 2000 in Japanese; and in 2001 in English, pp. 8–12). This paper was shortened and modified from the English newsletter text. For an article which addresses a similar issue from a different approach, see YAMAGUCHI forthcoming.

theme assigned to me. Lastly I will present my suggestions regarding today's theme.¹¹

THE INITIAL QUESTION

What would be an adequate appellation for expressions of "God" in today's church as a Christian faith community?¹²

Here are some observations behind the question:

- A. In the church in contemporary Japan, the metaphor "God the Father" is used customarily and exclusively in such a way that it makes us feel that the "God the Mother" metaphor or any other metaphor of female imaging is inadequate or inappropriate.
- B. All God-language is an expression in human language of our relation to God in the context of our faith communities. Languages, symbols, metaphors, and images not only express but also direct and shape human experiences, thoughts, and understanding. God-language used in faith communities has a profound impact on our perception of God, and on the shaping of our self-identities.
- C. An exclusive, systemic, and customary use of God-language that is biased in favor of one gender (male, in our case):
 - (1) distorts the image of God who is beyond human genders, and interferes with how we encounter and relate to God, and;
 - (2) affects the implication that only male images, not female images, adequately express God's love and greatness, thus negating the view of human beings that see both women and men as created in God's image, and leads to a sexist understanding of human beings and to a justification of patriarchy.
- D. It is especially problematic to use such one-sided male God-language customarily in church services and prayer meetings, which are not places for critical study and examination, but of worship and open-minded encounter with God. Such a custom will make young people unconsciously imagine God as male from their early days, and will implant patriarchal views and value systems.

11. I use the expressions "the Hebrew Bible" and "the Christian Testament" instead of the Christian-centered "Old Testament" and "New Testament."

12. I use the word God without gender differentiation in order to avoid the sexist English customary use of the standard forms for the male and the derived forms for the female, such as God and Goddess.

E. Moreover, to continue using the “God the Father” metaphor in our contemporary church in this way will be:

- (1) against the basic stance of Israel faith communities, regarding their God-language as seen throughout the Hebrew Bible, and;
- (2) against also the stance of Jesus himself as well as of his reign-of-God movement and the earliest Christian communities, regarding their God-language, as seen in the Christian Testament.

CONTEXTS OF GOD-METAPHORS IN THE BIBLE: THE HEBREW BIBLE

In speaking about God, faith communities of Israel acknowledged that God is the one who transcends human comprehension, and that no human language can adequately name and express God (Ex 3: 13–14; 20: 4, 7). Based upon this basic recognition, in addressing God, or referring to God with inadequate human language, the people of Israel used diverse metaphors and images for God lest they should seem to contain God within the limits of human experiential knowledge and thoughts, thus rendering God an idol.

For example, the metaphors found in the Hebrew Bible include: creator, spirit, wisdom, winged birds, rock (hill, cave), laboring woman, midwife, mother, compassionate mother (or mother with womb-like compassion), breasts, nurturer, educator, helper, partner, lover, husband, father, deliverer, and so on. Note that, among more than one thousand appearances of the word father in the Hebrew Bible, it is applied to God only fifteen times.¹³

Thus, any exclusive, systemic, and customary use of a particular metaphor is an action that goes against the basic stance and wisdom of our spiritual ancestors as seen in the Hebrew Bible. A metaphor, if used in such an exclusive way, will lose its essential metaphoric function (that is, similarity, dissimilarity, and transcendence), and increase the danger of idolatry.

CONTEXTS OF GOD-METAPHORS IN THE BIBLE: THE CHRISTIAN TESTAMENT

In the Christian Testament the “God the Father” metaphor is used many times. Regarding this aspect, it is important that we pay particular attention to its historical context, and examine its usage as well as purpose and meaning in a particular historical situation. In the following, I will first mention the contentions arising from my inquiries, and then I will present my inquiries and observations in greater detail.

A. In praying to and speaking about God, the historical Jesus of Nazareth fol-

13. For the direct address to God, only two times: Isa 63: 16; 64: 7. See, for example, Bos 1995; KINUKAWA 2001, pp. 1–8 (both English and Japanese versions).

lowed the traditional practices of Jewish faith communities, and used a variety of expressions, metaphors, and images.

- B. It is conceivable that Jesus sometimes addressed God by the Aramaic address “Abba” (my father). Such an address, however, was not unique to Jesus, nor was it central in his God-language, but one of the longstanding Jewish traditions in prayer and song.
- C. In the stories of Jesus in the Gospels, Jesus expresses God as “Father” in such a way that would undermine patriarchal social structure from the bottom. This attitude is in accordance with Jesus’ teaching, lifestyle, and the way he related to people as testified to in his reign-of-God movement and in the earliest Christian faith communities.¹⁴
- D. The earliest Christian communities began to apply the title of “Father” to God as an expression of their political and religious resistance, directly challenging Roman imperial worship of that time.

We are left with the question: Was “God the Father” central in Jesus’ God-language? In the Christian Testament, there are many instances of the “God the Father” metaphor, which gives the impression that it was central in Jesus’ God-language. However, on close examination of the biblical texts, it becomes clear that the expression “God the Father” was not so often used by Jesus himself or by his reign-of-God movement, but that it gained importance in the earliest Christian communities.¹⁵

The Gospels tell us that, in speaking about God, Jesus often used in his parables the term *basileia* (feminine noun; meaning “reign-of-God”) as well as metaphors familiar to both male and female farmers.¹⁶ When Jesus talked about God, he also used female images.¹⁷ Furthermore, he used expressions that would evoke the God of Israel in the female figure of Sophia (Wisdom) who promises rest and *shalom* (peace) to all the heavily laden, who invites everyone

14. The movement Jesus initiated (or the movement of which he was one of the leading figures) is now called the “Jesus movement” or “Jesus’ reign-of-God movement.” There were various Jewish reign-of-God movements that existed as religious and political resistance movements under Roman imperial rule around the first century CE.

15. The number of passages in which Jesus calls God “Father” in the Gospels: Mk: 1; Q: 1; SM: 1; SL: 2; Jn: 73. (Q= Quelle source, which is assumed to have been used as a source both by Mark and Luke; SM=material from Matthew’s special source, often referred to simply as M; SL=material from Luke’s special source, often referred to simply as L.) The number of passages in the Gospels which use “Father” to indicate God are as follows: Mk: 4; Lk: 15; Mk: 49; Jn: 109 (D’ANGELO 1992c). Regarding the Johannine Gospel’s numerous use of “Father” to indicate God, see YAMAGUCHI 2002a, p. 54.

16. These include sowing, growing seeds, mustard seeds, bread-making, a jewel in the field, a pearl, and so on (see, for example, Mk 4: 1–9, 26–32; Mt 13: 1–9, 30–32, 44–45; Lk 8: 4–8; 13: 18–19).

17. For example, a hen who gathers and protects her chicks under her wings, and a woman who tirelessly searches for her lost coin (Mt 23: 37; Lk 15: 8–10).

in the streets to her abundant table, and who bestows her life-giving wisdom to her people. In fact, the Gospels describe Jesus as a prophet of Sophia.¹⁸

Theologians who adhere to the metaphor “God the Father” have emphasized that it was unique to Jesus to address God as “Abba” (my father). However, it is now known that such an address to God already existed in the Jewish traditions of prayer and psalms, especially in pious prayers seeking God’s protection and help in the midst of persecutions or seeking God’s forgiveness for sin. Addressing God as “Abba” was not special or unique to Jesus, nor was it an indication of Jesus’ special closeness to God. (Once it was argued that “Abba” was equivalent to “Daddy,” an intimate address to one’s father, but such an argument had been refuted by later studies.)¹⁹

The gospels tell us that the last cry of Jesus on the cross was “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15: 34; Mt 27: 46). This seems to be part of an Israelite communal prayer “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”²⁰ One of the important metaphors in this prayer is that of midwife. In ancient times, a midwife also fulfilled the role of home doctor who provided healthcare not only for mothers and newborns but also for infants and children (ILAN 1995, p. 189; FRENCH 1987, pp. 69–85). So one of the images of a midwife was a reliable helper in times of illness and weakness, someone who knows the person since birth or even before.

That Jesus’ last cry, according to the Gospels, evoked, among others, the image of God as midwife is interesting. It tells us that such a female image was also a significant one in Jesus’ God-language. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to accept the tradition of the so-called “Lord’s prayer” as one of many teachings by Jesus, only some of which the Gospels handed on to us.

Furthermore, we should remember that it is often more important to understand the intention of Jesus’ teaching, rather than to follow it slavishly. Jesus rejected the legalism which makes people obey the Law only literally. He taught his disciples to understand and observe the primary life-giving intention of the

18. Mt 11: 28–30; 23: 37; Lk 7: 35; 13: 34; 14: 13–24; 15: 2, 8–10; Jn 1: 1–18, among other passages. Sophia, the female image of the God of Israel, first appears in the biblical tradition as the personification of the Wisdom of God around the sixth century BCE (Proverbs 1, 8, 9, and so on). The image was gradually enriched, having been stimulated by various female divine images of neighboring peoples, especially by integrating attractive features of Isis, who wielded great power in the Hellenistic world. Participants in Jesus’ reign-of-God movement seemed to have identified themselves as messengers and prophets of Sophia in their ministry. Regarding Jesus as a prophet of Sophia, see WAINWRIGHT 1998; SCHOTT 1992, pp. 81–173; YAMAGUCHI 2002a, pp. 60–65.

19. See D’ANGELO 1992a and the references it contains.

20. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?... Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help....” (Ps 22: 1, 9–11; and so on).

Law in their own contexts.²¹ It is therefore important for us to pay attention to the original intention of Jesus' teaching, in his historical context, when considering the words he used to address God.

Now, when Jesus taught his followers to pray to God, saying "Our Father who is in heaven," what kind of meaning did the expression "father in heaven" have for people in the first century Greco-Roman world? One thing we want to pay attention to here is Roman imperial worship at the time.

In the first-century Roman Empire, Jupiter/J Zeus was worshipped as "Father in heaven," and each of the Roman emperors was deified and worshipped as the "Father," the divine agent on earth. We need to keep this historical context in mind as we hear the expression "God the Father" in the Christian Testament.

For those Jews who were colonized under Roman rule, to pray to the God of Israel as the only "Father in heaven," and not to call anyone on earth "Father," directly challenged Rome's imperial control and emperor worship. It was a daring statement of political and religious resistance:

"Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

(Mt 6: 9–10 /Lk 1: 2)

"And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.... The greatest among you will be your servant."

(Mt 23: 9, 11)

Such a practice of resistance, as well as their open table communion (eating-together) with those who were despised by society, built up a community that included everybody equally as children of God, and thus undermined the Roman patriarchal social structure from the bottom. Both the execution of Jesus and the succeeding fierce persecution of Christians by the Roman political power illustrate the cost they had to pay for such practices and lifestyles under Roman imperial domination.

Thus we see that the God-language of "God the Father," in the particular historical context of Jesus' movement and the earliest Christian communities, was a faith expression of their communal practices and lifestyles which resisted patriarchal relationships and the social structures of domination-submission. In this way they challenged the oppressive Roman power, and set forth egalitarian and inclusive human relationships and society. Therefore, when we pray in our own particular historical context, it is important to choose words and practices that will articulate and nurture such a faith of resistance and hope.

21. This is clear in the Gospels, especially in Jesus' stance and actions regarding the Sabbath observation. The Sabbath Law was originally meant to give life to people, but as it was handed down to people in different historical contexts, it was turned into a Law that could kill people. The actions of Jesus appeared to oppose the Law, if viewed only literally, but were more truly an expression of his ministry to complete the Law (to observe the Law fully) in its original life-giving intention.

Unfortunately, however, the church in its succeeding history used the word Father in a way that utterly betrays Jesus' teaching in the Gospels. That is, the church called earthly clerics "Father" and transformed the church structure itself into a patriarchal institution. In the course of this history of the church, the rich variety of God-language and metaphors were lost. The "God the Father" metaphor became not only central but exclusive to the God-language of the church.

Thus, the expression lost its impact to subvert patriarchal structures in the church as well as in society, but rather became a tool to maintain and reinforce them. By customarily addressing God with the expression "God the Father" in the church, we may have lost and distorted significant aspects of God with which we should have otherwise been blessed in our communal Christian understanding of God.

NEW QUESTIONS

Based upon the above observations, I would like to pose some new questions. In today's context, what kind of actions would help to recover the things that have been damaged, distorted, or lost in the long history of exclusive use of the God-language "God the Father"? What kind of actions would be necessary to challenge and transform patriarchal relationships, values, and structures in both church and society?

MORE THOUGHTS AND SUGGESTIONS

Changing our words and expressions is essential to changing our consciousness and social structures. It is true that the social reality does not change by a "mere" change of the words we use. Nevertheless, it is a first step toward such change. Introduction of new words, symbols, metaphors, images, and so on makes people become conscious of things they have become used to unconsciously, and brings about surprises and new questions. In this way, we will see our daily routine in a new light, and act with a new consciousness. Such small changes in our daily lives form the matrix of much broader cultural and social changes. Our conscious choice and use of words and expressions in our faith communities is an essential issue of faith; how our encounters with God might be enriched by this.

The "God the Father" language praises our God as the "Almighty," "King of Kings," "Lord of Lords," and thus reinforces our values of patriarchy, imperialism, Victorianism, and expansionism, our lifestyles of power-oriented militarism and passive escapism, as well as our practices of colonial domination and ecological destruction. This language cannot responsibly answer the issues of our reality, such as mass-scale starvation, genocide and war, and the suffering

of the powerless and the innocent, all of which have been endlessly repeated in our history.²²

As we turn our eyes to biblical traditions, we encounter the God who is far beyond the images we can envision with our conventional metaphors, such as “the Almighty” or “God the Father.” God created the whole cosmos, bestowed dignity and freedom to humans, brought people out of the house of slavery, and led them to form communities based upon relationships not of domination and submission but of autonomy and mutual responsibility.

The relationships God held with humans illustrates one who is not a God of absolute power-control but of continuous love and care regardless of the repeated misconduct of humans. This God abides with the least among humans, bears heavy loads with them, becomes indignant toward the unjust, brings comfort and hope to those in despair and those who struggle, and encounters people as the life-giving, life-sustaining, living God. In order to articulate and transmit such rich aspects of the reality of God and of our relationships with God in our faith communities, it is important to use diverse expressions, both old and new, responding to our particular historical contexts.

I do not intend to say that the “God the Father” metaphor is itself the problem. What I want to point out is that it is necessary to use a “Mother” metaphor intentionally in today’s context, in order to undo the bias generated by the long-term exclusive, systemic, and customary use of the “God the Father” metaphor. It is necessary if we are to restore a more adequate balance to our God-language. It will also be helpful to use expressions, such as “Mother-father God” in order to constantly remind ourselves of God’s transcendence of human sexes/genders.

At the same time, it will be important to use diverse metaphors together lest we fall into idolatry or contain God’s image in a fixed form through inadequate human language. At least for the time being, it will be especially important to introduce a variety of metaphors that enable us to imagine God in female images. In using many different metaphors, we should be mindful of using them in ways that will not reinforce gender stereotypes regarding “motherhood,” “fatherhood,” “femininity,” “masculinity,” and so on, but will emancipate women and men from conventional stereotypes.

Based upon all of the above observations and thoughts, I conclude that the use of diverse metaphors is justified and encouraged as an important communal task for the following reasons:

1. It is a practice passed down from our ancestral faith communities, from the time of the Hebrew Bible, in their basic stance toward God-language.

22. For a suggestion on changing these divine images in composing new hymns, see WREN 1991. For examples of new hymns, see also WINTER 1999.

2. It is also a practice which learns from Jesus himself, Jesus' reign-of-God movement, and the earliest Christian communities, from their daring religious and political challenges in their particular historical context, and which engenders new attitudes toward justice and the well-being of all the children of God, in our own historical context.

Women in Ministry: Meeting Martha Again for the First Time

In church, we were taught that all the disciples, apostles, and church leaders were male.²³ Only recently have we learned that women also played significant leadership roles in Christian origins, both in the Jesus movement and in the earliest churches. We women have just begun discovering what had been lost for almost two thousand years of our history. Thus, we women have been given an opportunity to live at a time of great transformation in the history of Christianity.²⁴

Re-visioning the past of two thousand years ago or more is not just to know things about the past. It is to see our past differently. History has always been the history of the "historical winners." To search for the lost or distorted memories of our past is to re-member "women," that is, women and the majority of men, all of those who had been rendered as "the other" by a tiny group of elite males. It is also to restore history to women, and women to history.²⁵

Even if it means to restore the history of "the socially weak" or "the oppressed poor," it is not merely the history of "the victims" but that of ordinary people who suffered, shed tears, got angry, loved, struggled, laughed, and lived with various hopes and wishes. It means not to let the history of women be distorted or forgotten. It also means to re-vision anew the formation of our identity, and to give strong roots to our future visions. All of these serve to emancipate us from the old identities that were manipulated by power-holders, to not let our dreams wither without roots, and to open up new paths that will

23. This section was first presented as a seminar paper on 27 July 2002 and later published as YAMAGUCHI 2002b.

24. In our newsletter, I used "wo/men" in the places where I write "women" in this paper. "Wo/men" ("wo/man" as well) is a way of writing proposed by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, to indicate that the category "women" (woman) is a social construct, and that patriarchy is maintained by the oppression of both women and subaltern men as "the other." This way of writing also functions as a linguistic corrective to androcentric (male-centered) language use that makes women secondary and invisible. I refrained from this way of writing in this paper only for the sake of the readers who are totally unfamiliar to this kind of practice. See Laura Beth Bugg, "Explanation of Terms (Glossary)" in SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA 2001, p. 216.

25. In writing "re-member," I am following Mary Rose D'Angelo, in order to convey "the ideas of bringing what has been hidden out of the shadows of history, of putting together what has been dismembered and of making someone a member of oneself/of the community in a new way" (D'ANGELO 1992b, p. 202).

lead us to lives of autonomy and dignity with raised consciousness and historically grounded new visions.

THE MARTHA WE “KNOW”?

What does the Martha we “know” look like? An active woman in the kitchen? A woman chided because of her complaint? From where do these images come? The Bible? Interpretations of the Bible (or sermons, or bible classes)? From our own life-experiences? Let us begin our examination with a careful reading of our Biblical text, Jn 11: 1-12: 11.

In our modern Bibles, the Biblical texts are divided into many sections with subtitles. The original Biblical texts, however, did not have such sections or titles, no chapters or verses, not even particles such as commas, periods, question marks, or quotation marks. These divisions and marks were made based on certain later interpretations of the texts. So, when we read Biblical texts, we may do better if we free ourselves from such later additions.

The first century world was that of an ancient oral culture. People communicated with each other by telling stories: for education, for entertainment, and for religious activities. At storytelling gatherings where people told old and new stories, the stories were modified for the needs and amusement of the audience.

Therefore, there was not only a great repertory of stories but also innumerable different versions and variations of each story. A written story represents only one among a huge number of variations. In such a milieu, written stories were read aloud, much like storytelling performances.

As a result, many biblical stories are structured in chiasmic forms (A-B-C-D-C'-B'-A') with multiple foreshadowing and echoing motifs, composed like interwoven tapestries. These features are common to stories and narratives in oral cultures.

The structure of the Johannine Martha story can be described as follows:

- A. Lazarus under death threat—deepened in A'
- B. Martha's faith confession—echoing contrast with B'
- C. Jesus' sharing in tears with Judean neighbors—opposing contrast with C'
- D. Jesus' life-giving sign in the raising of Lazarus—center of the structure & story; foreshadowing Jesus' resurrection
- C'. Judean authorities' plot to kill Jesus—multiply foreshadowed plot
- B'. Mary's anointing service—foreshadowing Jesus' foot-washing
- A'. Lazarus and Jesus under death threats

Thus, A & A' form the frame of this story, and the theme of A is deepened in A'. D is located at the center of the structure, indicating the center of the story/message. That is, “Jesus is exposed to the death threat because of his life-giving sign. Death, however, is not the end, but there is shown a hope for resur-

rection.” The Judean neighbors and authorities illustrate the story frame in an opposing contrast, while Martha and Mary illuminate the message in an echoing contrast.

IMPORTANT TERMS AND PHRASES IN THE STORY

It is clear that Martha and Mary play important roles in the story. Let us now pay attention to important terms and phrases found in the story. In this Gospel, only the siblings Lazarus, Martha, and Mary are depicted as Jesus’ friends whom Jesus loves (11: 5). At the same time, Martha and Mary are disciples. The Johannine Gospel identifies the teacher-disciple relationship by having the disciples use two terms for Jesus, “teacher” and “lord” (13: 13):

- for disciples in general (11: 8, 12)
- for Martha (11: 28, 21)
- for Mary (11: 28, 32)
- for Mary Magdalene (20: 16, 18)

It is noteworthy that those who are described as “disciples” by name are only three in the Gospel: Martha, Mary and Mary Magdalene.

Moreover, we see another chiasmic structure embedded in the story.

- A. Martha’s trusting words in the midst of her hardship (11: 21–22)
- B. Jesus’ climactic “I am” revelation (11: 25)
- C. Martha’s faith confession (11: 27)
- B’. Jesus’ climactic sign action (11: 41–44)
- A’. Martha’s *diakonia* (service/ministry) at the last supper in Bethany (12: 2)

In this structure, Martha’s words in A contain two elements of the traditional Jewish lament, namely the address and the complaint. This means that Martha is petitioning God through Jesus, based on her acknowledgment of and trust in God as the source of Jesus’ power. This trust, which is paired with her *diakonia* at A’, points to her faith confession that is located at the center of this structure.²⁶

Martha’s faith confession deserves special attention. Her words, “You are the Christ, the son of God, the one who is to come into the world” (11: 27), echoes the faith confession to which the Johannine Gospel wishes to lead the audience: “these things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (20: 31). Martha thus takes on the role of the spokesperson who testifies to the faith of the Johannine

26. In our Center newsletter, I used “G*d” instead of “God.” This also follows Elisabeth SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA’s suggestion to indicate that G*d is ultimately unnamable and ineffable (2001, p. 210).

communities. Here we see that in this Gospel Martha is assigned the representative leadership role that is assigned to Peter in all the other canonical Gospels (Mt 16: 16, Mk 8: 29, Lk 9: 20).

Martha's "*diakonia*" also merits our special attention. First, the word "*diakonia*" refers to the ministerial service as well as to the service at the table. In the Johannine Gospel, however, this word is used only twice: for Martha's activity here (12: 2) and in Jesus' discourse on true discipleship (12: 26). This very limited use of the word implies that the word is used as an important theological term, meaning a ministerial service, in this Gospel.

Next, the Bethany supper is related in a manner corresponding to the so-called "Last Supper." We find many parallels that appear only in these two scenes:

- (1) Both are within the context of Passover.
- (2) The word dinner (*deipnon*) is used only for two dinners: here for this Bethany dinner and elsewhere (Jn 13: 2) for the "Last Supper".
- (3) At both dinners, Jesus is with those whom he loved/his own.
- (4) In both scenes, a beloved friend (Lazarus/the Beloved Disciple) is described as "reclining" with Jesus.
- (5) In both scenes, Judas' negative presence is mentioned with his identification as treasurer and with references to his betrayal and the money-box.
- (6) In both scenes the acts of foot anointing/washing are mentioned with the description of wiping off (*ekmasso*), using the same Greek term that appears only in these scenes.
- (7) Both acts are made awkwardly in the middle of the dinner, not before dinner which was the common practice at the time.
- (8) Both acts are presented as loving service.
- (9) Both scenes are linked to Jesus' farewell/death.

From the above, we can infer that there existed various versions of the "Last Supper" in the storytelling repertory available at the time of the Gospel's writing, and Martha was described as presiding at the Bethany supper that corresponded to the Last Supper in Jerusalem.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER TEXT

We know that there is another story of Martha and Mary written in Luke (Lk 10: 38–42). Or perhaps we should say that only the Lukan version is well-known in the church. (Maybe we should speculate as to why this has been the case.)

Here, I would like to make a preliminary caution regarding certain specific tendencies Lukan texts exhibit. Luke seems to have intended to gain a good reputation for Christianity among the Greco-Roman upper class people (Lk 1: 3). He attempted to present Christians as good citizens or a "model minority," and

to describe women as ladies. Thus we need to be suspicious about the following aspects in his texts:

He obscures the figures of women leaders, and emphasizes images of wealthy women, dedicated to “feminine” services (Lk 8: 1–3).

He tends to divide the service into the “service of the word” and the “service at the table” in a hierarchical order (Acts 6: 1–6; no such division in John).

Therefore, in reading about female figures in Lukan texts, we need to read between the lines, asking the question, “Was it really so?” This questioning is what we call a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” As we read the texts about Martha with a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” we arrive at a new question: “Was there not a story of Martha’s call and ministry behind this Lukan text?”

We find that Martha is connected to the word “serve” (*diakoneo*) in both Gospels (Lk 10: 40, Jn 12: 2). This may reflect an early version or different versions in which Martha served as a minister. In the Lukan text, there is a calling of her name in a doubled way, “Martha, Martha” (10: 41). This has biblical parallels, for example in the cases of Jacob (Gen 46: 2), Moses (Ex 3: 4), Samuel (1 Sam 3: 4), and Paul (Acts 9: 4), in the context of calling to ministry. So, it is conceivable that Luke’s passage “Martha, Martha, only one thing is necessary” is reminiscent of a tradition in which Jesus calls Martha for ministry.

It is no longer possible to prove or disprove this historically. However, from the above intertextual reading (reading texts in comparison), we may safely guess that the story of Martha’s ministry was probably widely known, since her connection to the word *diakoneo* is preserved in both the Lukan and the Johannine Gospels. It is regrettable that this image of Martha as a minister is obscured or played down considerably in both texts.

I would not say that the image of Martha as “the active woman in the kitchen” is the problem. However, I would say firmly “No!” to the power that has distorted her image of a representative community leader or spokesperson into the image of a complaining woman in the kitchen.

EXAMINATION OF PLAUSIBILITY BASED ON HISTORICAL INFORMATION

We have envisaged the woman Martha who is a friend of Jesus, a disciple, a minister, and a representative leader at one of the earliest Christian communities. Is it plausible to imagine a historical woman like this new Martha?

In answer to this question we can first mention Elisabeth SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA’s book, *In Memory of Her* (1983), and her historical reconstruction of the “discipleship of equals” that was practiced at the Christian origins. Her scholarship has already been attested to by many other scholars’ historical reconstructions. The history of long and severe persecution of women leaders, starting from the time of early Christianity (second century) to the establish-

ment of Christianity as the Roman state religion (fourth century), and even after this, itself testifies to the historical reality of how widespread women's leadership roles were during the earliest period.²⁷

Therefore, we have abundant historical evidence for the plausibility that the historical memory of Martha as a woman leader was distorted and erased later in the patriarchal church history. And I would insist that Martha is not alone in being thus “re-membered.”²⁸ Should we not imagine many more women waiting for their “ressurrection” into our Christian history, into our ecclesiastic historical memories?

FROM HISTORICAL STUDIES TO PRESENT TRANSFORMATIONS

Now we have envisioned Martha, commemorated in stories as a woman leader figure, but marginalized, erased, and distorted into “a kitchen woman” or “a chided complaining woman” in the later process of biblical writing, editing, and interpretations. Is not this church history headed in the extreme opposite direction compared to that of its origins?

In the first century, the Jesus movement was brought forth by Jewish women and men who resisted Roman imperialistic patriarchy as well as the exclusivist teachings and practices of certain Jewish leading groups. After Jesus' death, the movement was carried on in Christian origins that continued its inclusive egalitarian practices.

However, these Christian movements were gradually transformed, as women leaders were denounced, labeled “heretics,” excluded and persecuted. The church was institutionalized according to patriarchal practice, and was accepted or welcomed by the Roman Empire as its state religion.²⁹

This male elitist patriarchal church history later led to cruel “witchcraft” persecution, as well as the legitimation of sexism and violence against women. It also led to the Western-centric Christian path of white male supremacy, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. We may also point out that it further led to the Western power-oriented justification of historical winners, as well as to the economic globalization that has engendered huge economic gaps, ecological destruction, and millions of refugees. In our attempts to hear the voices and whispers of women between the lines of biblical texts, and the voices of women in our contemporary world, we may be able to begin walking toward a history

27. The envisioning of the “discipleship of equals” in the earliest period of Christian communities should not be interpreted as the idealization of the earliest period of Christian history. In doing feminist theology, I see such emancipatory aspects of the earliest Christian traditions as part of the historical formative Christian prototype. Christian communities in the following generations are invited to succeed appreciatively, critically, and creatively in their own historical contexts.

28. See, for example, SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, 1983; SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, ed., 1994; TORJESEN 1993.

29. See YAMAGUCHI 2002a, pp. 97–109 for the double persecution women suffered.

that will respect the diversity of lifestyles and sexual orientations, and that will create world peace in ethnic and gender collaborations.

To restore or “re-member” into our communal memories images of biblical women leader figures that have been distorted and erased is to seek justice both for ancient and contemporary women in ministry. Our struggle to stop all kinds of discrimination against “women ministers” in our church and to build up better conditions for women ministers to work to their full potential is something for which we can claim a firm grounding in the spirituality and praxis in our Christian origins.

Toward a Faith that Learns from the Diversity of the Created World

Today, the church is at a crossroads. The church, not only in Japan but around the world, is facing an impasse. It appears to have become a place that holds no attraction, not just for independent women, but also for young people. Faced with a steady decline of membership, Christendom has embraced self-preservation and leans toward conservatism, only worsening the current impasse.

Furthermore, it is said that while the most serious cause for a third world war in the twenty-first century is the huge economic imbalance between haves and have-nots, the most dangerous sources that are likely to trigger or exacerbate the next world war are culture and religion. The time is long overdue for members of the whole human community to give top priority to opening the way for global shalom through interfaith dialogues that reflect critically upon the teachings, traditions, and histories of their own religions.

Fortunately, church-going people from all walks of life are today gradually showing sincere interest in learning from new critical feminist interpretations of the Bible as well as from Christian traditions. Regardless of their denominational differences, they are saying that new feminist biblical approaches to the Bible and Christian traditions are eye-opening and life-giving. Thus, as we find ourselves at this historic crossroads in our particular context in Japan, we wish to spread the word of feminists doing theology, seeking new encounters with the God who surpasses all human thought, and sharing new faith, hope, love and peace with those around us. Since we are all children of God, let us live our faith with happiness and joy, crossing all the patriarchal boundaries that divide us, and celebrating the rich diversity among us.

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