

Metaphors of the Divine

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HOW HAS THE PAST prevalence of certain metaphors of the divine led to a social and psychological bias entailing dominance and submission? This essay will show how this bias can be healed and brought into a new caring and all-embracing consciousness by entering into interconnectedness with other aspects of divine-human relationships that were less focused; and in doing so, how the ultimate Other can be encountered in a more holistic relationship.

The first section deals with postmodern perspectives for a new worldview in terms of interrelationships as the basis of this paper. The second section discusses metaphor in relation to the discoveries of this new awareness with its power and limitation, and with its characteristic features and entailments. The third section deals with masculine metaphors of the divine in conjunction with Jesus' relationship with the Father, and explores the role, names, and titles of God and of Jesus. Part four discusses the feminine metaphors of the divine so as to counterbalance the predominance of masculine metaphors. Part five deals with entity and substance of metaphors of the divine-human relationships, particularly observable in the writings of some mystics. Finally, the last section discusses orientational metaphors of the divine-human relationships, which are meant to indicate a more holistic interconnectedness among metaphors that have implications and relevance to the way we relate to God, others, and the creation in our human experiences.

POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVES OF INTERRELATIONSHIP

In the preface to *Beyond the Modern Mind*, Douglas Bowman differentiates the word "postmodern" from the word "modern" stating that the word modern is used to denote "the way of thinking and its attendant images that have dominated the Western world since the seventeenth century," whereas the word postmodern is used to denote "a new view of reality that can move us beyond our present limitations by expanding our modern intellectual and imaginative horizons in ways that will enable us to live upon this earth without destroying it."¹ In the chapter entitled "Possibilities and Perspectives for a New World View" of Bowman's book, Paul Knitter is quoted as summarizing a new dynamic view of reality as follows:

Reality was no longer seen as a well-ordered machine, made up of discrete parts neatly linked to each other. Rather, it was a buzz of activity, of constant process, in which the parts could not even be neatly determined and located. At its deepest, subatomic level, the world did not seem to show any "basic building blocks" or "beings," but rather an intricate, ever changing, and interrelating process of activity or becoming.

It was especially the new physics that prompted philosophers to a further insight into the way things are: if everything is a becoming rather than a being, the

becoming takes place through *interrelating*. If we can be only if we become, we can become only if we reach out and relate. Nothing, whether an electron or a human being, can be “an island unto itself.”²

Taking Knitter’s view as a point of departure, Bowman develops perspectives for a new worldview as those of relationships and underscores the fact that postmodern thinking is to be governed by the action verb in contrast to modern thought which has been governed by the static noun.³ To phrase it differently, the whole creation from the subatomic level to the vast expanse of the galaxies is in the process of becoming, participating in the creative action of God who lovingly lures rather than forces entities including humans to behave. Thus in the process of becoming as opposed to being which can be a discrete isolated entity, the interrelationship and interconnectedness of entities constitute the fundamental force of dynamic motion.

In the “I-Thou” relationship with God and with each other, humans and the whole creation are in the process of realizing who and what they are meant to be in the mind of God. Bowman sums up the implication of the postmodern view by stating that “interrelationship, novelty, and creative love characterize the Creator’s way with creation—not domination and force of power.”⁴ In this paper I attempt to enter into a new relationship that encompasses all things as dynamically connected, by taking up metaphors of the divine viewed as human efforts and failures to interconnect the divine and the human with the power of language.

METAPHOR

The human mind constantly learns something new by drawing similarities within dissimilarities and by making connections and relationships with something it has already known. It attempts to understand

abstract ideas and invisible entities by association, and to reach out to the unknown by analogy. In *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler states that the discoveries of science are the explosions of a hidden likeness, the acts of seeing or imagining in the mostly unconscious mind’s eye the analogy between otherwise unrelated entities. It means that two situations or events are similar in some respects, but not in all respects. In Koestler’s opinion, similarity is “a relation established in the mind by a process of selective emphasis on those features which overlap in a certain respect—along one dimensional gradient—and ignoring other features.”⁵ The act of finding similarities or of analogy is the temporary relinquishing of conscious controls over the disciplined routines of thoughts, which leads to a creative leap into finding unknown relationships. To phrase it differently, it entails the dual aspect of deconstruction and reconstruction. It is a deconstruction in the sense that it abdicates previous thoughts. It is a reconstruction in the sense that it discovers new relationships hitherto unknown.

Koestler gives examples of scientific discoveries made by finding analogies. According to him, the discoveries made by Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), the Renaissance astronomer and astrologist, are based on an analogy between the role of the Father in the Trinity and the role of the sun in the universe. Isaac Newton’s (1642–1727) discovery is based on the analogy between the behavior of the moon and an apple, and Louis Pasteur’s (1822–1895) discovery is based on an analogy between a spoiled culture and a cow-pox vaccine.⁶ Thus the essence of discovery is the interlocking of two previously unrelated matrices of thought; it is the finding of relationships frequently led by spontaneous intuitions, unconscious guidance and sudden leaps of imagination.

Language is fundamentally metaphorical, and more and more we live by

metaphors. In every discipline, new ideas, new concepts, and new discoveries are often captured by metaphors since they are suggestive of certain resemblances and open to multiple interpretations which trigger further discoveries. Thus many disciplines including the natural sciences have appreciated their indebtedness to metaphors and symbolic images in their investigative and discovery procedures. Yet, there is a danger; there are snares in metaphors. In spite of the benefits of leading the scientists to discoveries, in Koestler's opinion, words which are a blessing can turn into a curse. He says that words crystallize thought; they give articulation and precision to vague images and hazy intuitions—so much so that oftentimes the process of ideation and verbal formulation become so indistinguishable that they hamper any further imaginations and discoveries.⁷ He states that contrary to musicians and painters who might find it hard to convert their ideas into verbal expressions and also contrary to novelists who might find it difficult to express themselves because of the poverty of verbal expressions, the scientist's trouble with language is of a different nature, because he suffers not from the poverty of his verbal tools but rather from their over-precision and the hidden snares in them.

Koestler says, for example, that the over-precise meaning that the words "space" and "time" carried, had ensnared scientific thought from Aristotle to the Renaissance. Only in 1277 did empty or infinite space become at least imaginable and another four centuries were necessary until space and time acquired a new meaning in the Newtonian universe. In a Newtonian world, it was possible to conceive of absolute contexts of space and time within which an object could be isolated. For the next two hundred years, space and time had the nature of absolutes until Albert Einstein (1879–1955) transformed the view of the

universe without accepting these two words as ready-made tools.⁸

With the development of Einstein's theory of relativity in physics, common-sense notions of the absoluteness of space and time have been abandoned by scientists. It can no longer be taken for granted that measurements of either distance or duration in one frame of reference will be identical to those taken in another. In fact, the motion of the reference frame determines the measure. A similar situation holds true with the metaphors of the divine in which the over-precise meaning attached to God the Father, for example, has crippled our imagination and creativity in exploring our multidimensional relationships with God.

Metaphor has a long history and has grown into a more multidimensional relationship with human language. Aristotle defined metaphor in terms of the two disciplines, rhetoric and poetics, with the distinct goal of persuasion in the political art of eloquence and oratory, and in the poetic art of tragedy. For him, therefore, metaphor had a unique structure with two functions: a rhetorical function and a poetic function. In *Poetics*, Aristotle defines metaphor and writes that "metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy."⁹

One of the principal contemporary theorists on metaphor, I.A. Richards, writes that "when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction."¹⁰ Sallie McFague comments on Richards' statement by saying that "the most important element in this definition is its insistence on *two active thoughts which remain in permanent tension or interaction with each other*."¹¹ In reference to tension in metaphor, Paul Ricoeur says:

The place of metaphor, its most intimate and ultimate abode, is the copula of the verb *to be*. The metaphorical “is” at once signifies both “is not” and “is like.” If this is really so, we are allowed to speak of metaphorical truth, but in an equally “tensive” sense of the word “truth.”¹²

[In metaphor] one term taken non-metaphorically acts as a support, whereas the other taken metaphorically fulfills the function of characterization.¹³

This distinction corresponds to Richards’ “tenor” and “vehicle” in which the tenor is thought of in relation to the vehicle. When the tension is lost, or when Ricoeur’s “is and is not” quality of metaphor is lost, literalization follows. McFague notes that “by excluding other relationships as metaphors, the model of father becomes idolatrous, for it comes to be viewed as a description of God.”¹⁴ Sandra Schneiders notes that it is equally and simultaneously true that God is, and is not, our father. If the denial is repressed, the metaphor succumbs to literalism.¹⁵

There is also a dangerous tendency to characterize the vehicle by the tenor rather than the vehicle characterizing the tenor. Put in concrete terms, the metaphor “God is the Father” becomes literally “God is a male father,” or “a human father is God,” or even “a male is God,” resulting in the dictation of masculinity as normative of humanity and in relegating femininity to a derivative of the masculine norm.

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson say that a metaphor has entailments each of which may contain further entailments; thus a metaphor forms a network of entailments, which may, on the whole, either fit or not fit our experiences. When the network does fit, the experiences form a coherent whole, and with such a metaphor we experience a kind of reverberation down through the network of entailments that awakens and connects our mem-

ories of past experiences and serves as a possible guide for future ones.¹⁶

This point can be illustrated by taking three metaphors of Christ from the “O” antiphons formerly chanted at Divine Office in Latin during the Advent season of waiting for the coming of the Messiah. The three metaphors selected as examples are *O Oriens* (“O Dawn of the East”), *O Radix Jesse* (“O Root of Jesse”), *O Clavis David* (“O Key of David”), all of which begin with the plaintive exclamation O! The following is the *O Oriens* metaphor of Christ, first in Latin and then in English:

O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae, et sol iustitiae: veni, et illumina sedentes in tenebris, et umbra mortis.

O Dawn of the East, brightness of the light eternal, and Sun of Justice, come and enlighten them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.¹⁷

In this antiphon, Christ is the Rising Sun (Lk. 1:78), the Dawn of the East, the Brightness of the eternal light, and the Sun of Justice. The metaphor, Christ is the Rising Sun, has entailments such as: Christ is the Dawn of the East, Christ’s brightness shines over the earth as eternal light, Christ’s splendor gives life to people who sit in the darkness of sin and the shadow of death, Christ’s radiance illumines the way to the Father (Is. 9:2), Christ is the Sun of Justice (Is. 60:19–20) and Christ as light gives joy and hope to those who grope in darkness. Some of these entailments are metaphorical (e.g., the first example), while others are not (e.g., the last example). Each of these entailments may embed further entailments and constitute a whole net of entailments which portray our multidimensional relationships with Christ. When metaphors are taken literally, these entailments are also frozen.

Lakoff and Johnson give five characteristic features of metaphor that provide a framework for our discussion. First, the

metaphor highlights certain features while suppressing others. Second, the metaphor does not merely entail other concepts, but entails very specific *aspects* of these concepts. Third, the metaphor gives the tenor a new meaning. Fourth, metaphors can thus be appropriate because they sanction actions, justify inferences, and help us set goals. Fifth, the meaning a metaphor will have for a person will be partly culturally determined and partly tied to his or her past experiences.¹⁸

These points can be illustrated with concrete examples. First a metaphor highlights certain features while suppressing other features. In the metaphor, “Christ is the Rising Sun,” the dynamic motion of the rising sun and the gradual penetration of the sunbeams into the earth are brought into the foreground and mask other aspects of Christ, which for example, can be captured by the other two metaphors, “Christ is the Root of Jesse” and “Christ is the Key of David.” In the second metaphor, Jesse is the father of David (Rt. 4:22) who is anointed King (I S. 16:13), and whom the spirit of Yahweh seizes and blesses with prosperity (I Ch. 2:13).

The second characteristic feature of metaphors concerns the specification of certain aspects of these concepts. For example, the “Christ is the Root of Jesse” metaphor specifies a certain root, not any kind of root. The “O” antiphon of “O Root of Jesse” says as follows:

O Root of Jesse, who standest for an ensign of the people, before whom kings shall keep silence, and unto whom the Gentiles shall make their supplication: come to deliver us, and tarry not.¹⁹

The metaphor specifies the ancestors of Jesus, the house of David, and points to the root of all family trees, and to the Tree of Life. It adds the dimension of family history that is completely missing in the “Christ is the Rising Sun” metaphor.

Metaphors thus highlight certain aspects while masking others, and at the same time specify certain aspects by demarcating them from others. The third characteristic feature of metaphors concerns giving a new meaning to the tenor of the metaphor and a mutual feedback effect between the metaphor and human experiences. The third metaphor is taken from the “O” antiphon, “O Key of David”:

O Key of David, and Scepter of the house of Israel, who openest and no man shutteth, who shuttest and no man openeth: come and bring forth from his prison-house, the captive that sitteth in darkness and in the shadow of death.²⁰

The key is a symbol of power, the secret of Truth ever more to be revealed to the humble and to be hidden from the proud. It is the key that opens the door of liberation and freedom, and closes the door of sin and falsehood. So Christ is the Key that opens and closes the doors for all humanity symbolized by David. Thus the tenor Christ is given a new meaning in our consciousness, that of his great power of saving all humanity, and this awareness calls for our new response, new relationships, and new feedback to Christ.

The fourth characteristic feature of metaphor deals with the relationship between the power of language and actions. Once metaphors are expressed or articulated, the significance of their meaning to which they point engages us with certain kinds of emotion, response and action. If, for example, the metaphor “Christ is the Rising Sun” brings the hope of light and warmth and new life into a person, the awakening of the spirit and yearning for God take place in his or her consciousness. Similarly, the metaphor “Christ is the Root of Jesse” brings to our awareness the root relationships based not on human lineage but on Christ, and this realization may lead to a critique or a reform of societal and cultural

structures that enslave human freedom and dignity.

The fifth characteristic feature of metaphor concerns aspects that are culturally determined and tied to human experiences. The “Christ is the Key of David” and “Christ is the Root of Jesse” metaphors illustrate this point. At one time in the history of the Israelites, Samuel, the prophet, is instructed by God to choose one of Jesse’s sons to anoint as King of Israel, and he is led to choose David, the youngest shepherd boy, the least expected among the possible prospects. David is a man after God’s own heart (I K. 2:3); he is the personification of human misery and grandeur, rising and falling, sinfulness and forgiveness, a beloved hero and king of Israel whose stories are told in Samuel (I S. 16–22; II S. 7–9), Chronicles (I Ch. 28–29:30), Kings (1 K. 2), and Psalms (Ps. 138–145). Thus the meaning of a metaphor is enriching when it is taken within its cultural contexts, but taken without the context a metaphor may not convey shades of meaning it was originally intended to convey.

MASCULINE METAPHORS OF THE DIVINE

No metaphor can capture God adequately since God is the mystery of all mysteries, infinitely uncontrollable by and incomprehensible to our human mind. Yet God is the greatest truth with whom our hearts yearn to relate and whose relationships we want to express in our language. Figurative language, metaphor in particular, expresses a relationship between God and human experiences of God. Jesus is the metaphor of God, the language of God, the Word incarnate, and Jesus uses metaphors to articulate his experiences of God. To say that Jesus is the metaphor of God is to say that in Jesus the loving relationship between God and human beings is revealed and that the ultimate meaning and destiny of human life is being made manifest.

For Jesus, first and foremost, God is Abba, a loving Father for whom everything

is possible, and to whose will he completely surrenders himself with love (Mk. 14:36, Lk. 22:42). The all-knowing and all-powerful Father (Mk. 13:32) is a forgiving and compassionate God as portrayed in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:21). Jesus addresses God as “Our Father,” and prays that the Father’s name be held holy, that his kingdom come and that his will be done (Mt. 6:7).

Jesus sees himself as perfectly united with the Father, and in this union differentiates himself from the Father. Jesus asserts that the Father and he are one (Jn. 10:30), that to have seen him is to have seen the Father (Jn. 14:9), and that he had the glory of the Father before the world was made (Jn. 17:5). At the same time, Jesus sees himself as distinct from the Father as the Word made flesh (Jn. 1:14), and as the Son of God doing his Father’s work (Jn. 10:36). Jesus says that the Father is greater than he (Jn. 14:28), that he is doing exactly what the Father has told him (Jn. 14:31), that he can do nothing by himself and that his aim is to do not his own will but the will of God who sent him (Jn. 5:30).

Jesus’ relationship with the Father is entirely based on mutual love, in mutual loving surrender and perfect union, as the Precursor testifies that the Father loves the Son and has entrusted everything to him (Jn. 3:35) and the Father says to Jesus, “My Son, the Beloved, on whom my favor rests” (Mt. 3:17). Similarly, God invites all human beings to intimate union with God, as Jesus prays, “May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you” (Jn. 17:21); Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love” (Jn. 15:9), and “I am in my Father and you in me and I in you” (Jn. 14:20). Thus Jesus’ use of the metaphor “Abba” for the Father is a striking breakthrough in the relationship with God since his contemporaries had never addressed God as Abba. Denis Edwards writes:

Jesus' use of this word (God as Abba) is unique and individual. It expresses the heart of his own encounter with God. It speaks of intimacy and familiarity, of boundless confidence and childlike trust. It speaks also of uncompromising obedience, an obedience that would lead to the cross. Jesus' unique sense of his own sonship and of his own mission is tied to his experience of God as Abba.²¹

These examples show that the relationship between God and Jesus is an infinitely loving relationship which necessitates total giving and receiving, and not an authority-and-submission relationship. Jesus' metaphor of God is a shift from a patriarchal view of God to a paternal view of God.

According to Sandra Schneiders, patriarchy is a social system based on absolute and unaccountable power over wives, children, servants, animals and properties with the authority of ownership extended even to the power of life and death, and this power of the father was considered by many as divinely established and therefore unalterable.²² Patriarchy is basically a hierarchical society of domination and submission, of superiority and inferiority. In the past the "fatherhood" of God has been used to justify patriarchy and to legitimate all forms of oppression of the weak by the strong, especially of women by men, by depriving women of full participation in social and religious functions, and by fostering destructive, inferior self-images of women.

Although Jesus' use of Father is culturally and historically conditioned by the patriarchal society in which he was situated, none of Jesus' metaphors of God justifies the hierarchical submission of women to men, nor the intrinsic superiority of men over women. The problem of depriving women of full participation in the life of the Church derives not from the way Jesus used the word "Father," but from the way we interpret the metaphor. Jesus addressed God as

Father, spoke about God as Father but never said that God is the Father. The form of address "Father," used by Jesus is not to show the maleness of God but to express the intimacy of Abba. Moreover, Jesus' metaphor of God taken in the root meaning of a loving relationship with God, rather than a power relationship, deconstructs the patriarchal images of God and reconstructs the paternal images of God. This interpretation liberates our imagination for freedom, and reorientate us towards a new quality of relationship with God, with men and women.

In the Old Testament God self-communicated as "I am who I am" or "I am who I shall be," depending on the translation of the verb (Ex. 3:14); this indicates that God is the mystery of mysteries beyond our comprehension and therefore neither names nor titles can adequately capture God's Being. Yet, there are literal designations, role names and titles that refer to God and to Christ in the Old and New Testaments. For example, God is creator, king, lord of hosts, and judge. God is the creator of all things in heaven and on earth, everything visible and everything invisible (Is. 45; Col. 1:16), creating through wisdom (Pr. 8:22-31) and making everything "very good," (Gn. 1:31), putting God's omnipotence at the service of God's saving design (Rm. 1:16), manifesting God's fidelity in the perpetuation of creation (Ps. 111; 146; 148), and calling God's creatures to a closer relationship with God (Ps. 139; 119:64; 145:9).

The Scripture says that all things were created through Christ, that he existed before anything was created and that he holds all things in unity (Col. 1:16), hinting at the relationship between creation and salvation by the incarnate Word, since the work of redemption is like a new creation (2 Co. 5:17; Ga. 6:15; Ep. 2:10). Sandra Schneiders says that God is literally the liberator who liberated the Hebrews out of the bondage in Egypt, the covenant-maker who bound

Israel and its God together at Sinai, and the restorer who brought the chastened people from exile.²³

God is the king of the kingdom of God which has become visible in and through Jesus. It is the kingdom where God's will reigns, where humankind learns God's majestic glory and sovereignty, and victory over sin (Ps. 145:12). "God's empire lasts from age to age" (Ps. 145:12), and "Yahweh is King for ever and ever" (Ps. 10:16). God is the King of glory, the strong, the valiant (Ps. 24:8-10), and reigns in righteousness, with integrity (Is. 32:1). Christ says that he is born for this, has come into the world for this, and that his is not a kingdom of this world, but that he is to bear witness to the truth (Jn. 18:33-37). At the same time Christ is the suffering servant of Yahweh in the building of the kingdom (Is. 53), who by bearing the consequence of sin discloses the reality of sin and liberates human beings from the bondage of sin.

At the nativity, the infant Jesus is also called the prince of peace, wonderful counselor, mighty God (Is. 9:6). Sallie McFague says that a revolution occurred in the use of the root-metaphor, the kingdom of God, exemplified in Jesus' parables and in Jesus as parable of God, and that Jesus is inextricably linked with the root metaphor as both the proclaimer of the kingdom and the way to the kingdom, initiating a new quality of relationship.²⁴

In the past, the root metaphor of the kingdom of God with God or Christ reigning as king was often used for the political purpose of oppressing and exploiting people, and for the justification of perpetuating the structures of domination in human history, characterized by the master-slave, and the ruler and the ruled relationships that are not based on love and communion, but on power and fear. Those in authority were thought to be divinely sanctioned and legitimized to govern their people with laws considered "divine" imposed upon them.

This situation is also portrayed in art, which had kings and nobles as its patrons, exemplified by the paintings of Byzantine art in which Christ sits enthroned as both emperor and judge giving the impression of dominating his people rather than loving them, and by those of Italian Renaissance art in which Christ is a comely prince somewhat alienated from crude human experiences.

God is frequently referred to by the title lord of hosts in the Old Testament, manifesting Godself as the leader of Israel as in "Yahweh Sabaoth, the God of the armies of Israel" (1 S. 17:45), as the spiritual force standing at God's own disposal as in "I am the captain of the army of Yahweh, and now I come" (Jos. 5:13f), and as the force of the universe as in "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh Sabaoth, His glory fills the whole earth" (Is. 6:3). God is the supreme and righteous Judge, "the Judge of all" (Heb. 12:23), who judges the whole world, and administers justice (Gn. 18:25; Ps. 94:2; 2 Tm. 4:8).

Jesus is literally our savior, our redeemer, our messiah, the emmanuel, our high priest and our mediator. In reference to Jesus, Luke writes, "A Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (Lk. 2:12). Jesus is Redeemer as in "I, Yahweh, am your Savior and that your redeemer is the Mighty One of Jacob" (Is. 49:26). Jesus is our messiah, the anointed, par excellence, who rescues and redeems Israel as is foretold by the prophets, and because of the exaltation to the right hand of God, Christ is also called the messiah king (Ps. 110:1). Jesus is the emmanuel, God with us, as foretold by Isaiah as in "The Lord himself, therefore, will give you a sign. It is this: the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Emmanuel" (Is. 7:14). Jesus is the high priest by divine designation, not a priest of the line of Levi or Aaron, but according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:6), since Jesus offered not the blood of

goats and bull calves but his own blood, and because Jesus exercised sins and thus won an eternal redemption for us (Heb. 9: 11–13), and he is continually offering himself as the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. In this sense, Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant (1 Tm. 2:5; Heb. 12:24) who brought us into a new relationship with God.

Besides being king and judge, Jesus has also role titles such as teacher, master, and lord. John the Precursor draws the attention of people to Jesus, saying “Look, there is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). Jesus is addressed as rabbi, teacher, at the outset by his disciples (Jn. 1:39), and as the Lord as their intimacy grows as in “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn. 6:68). After the resurrection, Mary Magdalene calls Jesus rabbuni, master, with affection and intimacy (Jn. 20).

In the New Testament, Jesus reveals who he is by the so-called “I am” statement. Jesus says “I am the living Bread of Life which has come down from heaven” (Jn. 6:51), “I am the Light of the world” (Jn. 8:12), “I am the Resurrection” (Jn. 11:25), “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jn. 14:6), “I am the good Shepherd” (Jn. 10:11), and “I am the Son of God” (Jn. 10:36). They are Jesus’ self-appellations which have significance in revealing the relationship between Jesus and human beings, as distinct from God’s self-appellation, “I am who I am” (Ex. 3:14).

Metaphors provide inexhaustible reflections on the ever unfolding mystery of God with whom we come to deeper relationships. Yet, there is a danger of being trapped in false images of God, unless we let go of our false images and replace them continually by images that convey deeper meanings of our human experiences.

FEMININE METAPHORS OF THE DIVINE

It is a well-known fact that one of the archetypes found by Jungian depth psychology concerns the great mother in our personal and collective unconscious. In fact, the underlying primordial power symbolized by the mother goddess dominates the archaeological records of the ancient world. The cult of the great Mother was established in Canaan at the time of the Hebrew settlement. Kenneth Leech quotes E. O. James who claims that there was in fact one goddess worshipped under many names—Demeter (Eleusis), Isis (Egypt), Inanna-Ishtar (Sumeria), Astarte (Syria), Tiamat (Babylonia), Athena (Athens), and that behind the specific female deities there was the great primal mother, the source of all reality.²⁵

In Greek myth, the earth goddess Gaia (or Ge) gives birth to the universe. The Gaia Hypothesis, a late twentieth century model for planetary and cellular dynamics, is a startling new paradigm for the wholeness of creation as seen by James Lovelock in *The Ages of GAIA*,²⁶ and by William Irwin Thompson in *G.A.I.A. A Way of Knowing*.²⁷ Leech remarks that it is an astonishing fact that in the very heartland of the religion of the great mother, Yahwism allows God no consort, lover, sister, or mother.²⁸ At the expense of excluding the female from the deity and from full participation in religion, Jewish religion fortifies its masculine structure.

God is neither male nor female, and far transcends masculine and feminine qualities attributable to human gender. The feminine is an aspect of a person of either gender, whereas the female is a person of one gender.²⁹ Our consciousness has been contaminated by the preponderance of masculinity in the metaphors of God since most of the Bible images, Jesus’ use of the name, Father, and Jesus’ incarnation as male all support the masculinity of the image of

God. However, for a more holistic view, the metaphor of fatherhood of God must be placed in its relationship to the metaphor of motherhood of God in order to counterbalance and heal the preponderance of masculine images that have distorted our understanding of God's relationship with men and women. If God has created both male and female in God's image (Gn. 1:27), and if God is reflected in them, then God must be described in terms of both masculine and feminine qualities even if God far surpasses all these qualities attributable to human beings.

In God's own statement of who God is (Ex. 3:14), "I am Who I am"—the *being*, the *great becoming*—both the fatherhood and motherhood of God are included since God is the fullness of all relationships, the plenitude of life. In the Old Testament, God self-communicates as mother, conceiving, giving birth and nursing the Israelites with a love stronger than any human mother's love as Yahweh says, "Does a woman forget her baby at the breast, or fail to cherish the son of her womb? Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you" (Is. 49:15), "Am I to open the womb and not bring to birth? I, who bring to birth, and I to close it?" (Is. 66:9), and "At her breast will her nursing be carried and fondled in her lap. Like a son comforted by his mother will I comfort you" (Is. 66:13).

In the Old Testament the wisdom of God is a feminine principle having powerful qualities of knowledge and virtue (Wisdom 6–9), personified as a woman who provides shelter (Sr. 14:20–27), a virgin bride and a mother who gives a person the bread of understanding to eat and the water of wisdom to drink (Sr. 15:1–10), the mistress of discretion, the inventor of lucidity of thought who walks in the way of virtue and in the paths of justice (Pr. 8:12–33). Schneiders writes that two personifications of God which have special power for Old Testament and later Jews are wisdom and *shekinah*, and that both wisdom and the

divine presence are always presented as feminine, both grammatically and rhetorically.³⁰ *Shekinah*, which is associated with the glory of God and which means "to dwell," is the mysterious and perceptible presence of God among the people as a pillar of cloud to show them the way, and by night, a pillar of fire to give them light (Ex. 13:21). Schneiders states that "despite the rich potential for the development of a feminine God-image which these personifications offered to the Jewish imagination, the divine feminine was severely repressed in the interests of safeguarding the oneness and transcendence of God."³¹

According to S. M. Albert, most of the Fathers of the Church referred to the motherhood in God as the highest and most touching form of human affection best fitted to represent the infinitely superior love which God has for each of God's children.³² Caroline Walker Bynum states that the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Irenaeus, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Augustine all describe Christ as Mother.³³ Clement of Alexandria speaks of God as Father and Mother, attributing God's essence to the masculine quality and God's loving compassion to the feminine quality of God:

And God himself is love; and out of love to [for] us became feminine. In his ineffable essence he is Father; in his compassion to [for] us he became Mother. The Father by loving became feminine; and the great proof of this is he whom he begot of himself; and fruit brought forth by love is love.³⁴

In the twelfth century there was a reemergence of feminine symbols of the divine, coupled with the women's movement of the Beguines and women's powerful influence on spirituality. The Beguine mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg is among such influential women. It was the twelfth century that saw the flowering of the image

of Jesus as mother, attributed to men such as Anselm of Canterbury and Bernard of Clairvaux.³⁵ Bynum also states that the medieval authors in whose work the image of God as mother is found include, among others, Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Gertrude the Great, Richard Rolle, Catherine of Siena, Bridget of Sweden, and Julian of Norwich, and notes that the most sophisticated use of the theme is Julian of Norwich's trinitarian theology.³⁶ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott traces feminine images of God throughout Christian traditions and also remarks on Julian of Norwich's unique contribution in this respect.³⁷

Julian of Norwich, an English mystic of the fourteenth century, writes in *The Revelations of Divine Love*:

Jesus Christ, who doeth good against evil, is our very Mother. We have our being of him, there, where the ground of Motherhood beginneth; with all the sweet keeping of love that endlessly followeth. As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. And that shewed he in all, especially in these sweet words where he saith "I it am." That is to say: I it am: the might and the goodness of the Fatherhood. I it am: the wisdom and the kindness of Motherhood.³⁸

Julian attributes motherhood to both God and Jesus and perceives that in the divine motherhood which is grounded in the Being of God, our soul is also deeply grounded and endlessly treasured. She says,:

Our high Father almighty God, who is Being, willed that the second Person should become our Mother.... As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. Our Father willeth, our Mother worketh, our Lord the Holy Ghost confirmeth.³⁹

Julian describes God's dealings with the soul in terms of a mother's feeding, tending and nurturing her child and writes, "The mother's service is nearest, readiest and surest; nearest: for it is most of kind; readiest: for it is most of love; surest: for it is most of truth."⁴⁰ Julian continues, "Our precious Mother Jesus, he can feed us with himself; and doth, full courteously and tenderly, with the Blessed Sacrament, that is the precious food of true life."⁴¹ Julian experiences God as a woman nursing her child at her breast, as she says "The mother can lay her child tenderly to her breast. But our tender Mother Jesus can lead us, homely, into his blessed breast, by his sweet open side; and shew us there, in part, the Godhead and the joy of heaven, with a ghostly sureness of endless bliss."⁴²

Julian's images of God include the entire cycle of divine Motherhood beginning with the enclosure and growth within the womb, the grounding of the infant's being in God, the labor pain and birth, the feeding, care and education of a child, loving the person to the point of death, rebirth and returning to the original womb—all of which speak of the birth of the soul in the ground of God, the birth of a cosmos, the process of becoming, and growth through relationships. Thus Julian's contribution is astonishingly whole and extraordinarily modern since it is related to a process of becoming. For models of God in a nuclear age, Sallie McFague writes:

The organic or evolutionary, ecological model is one that unites entities in a way basically different from the mechanistic model: instead of bringing entities together by means of common laws that govern all, creating a pattern of external relations, it unites by symbiotic, mutual interdependencies, creating a pattern of internal relations. In the organic model one does not "enter into relations" with others but finds oneself in such relation-

ships as the most basic given of existence.⁴³

In terms of metaphor for our time, we need models of mutuality that support interdependencies of God-humans-cosmos rather than those that support a hierarchical understanding of these relationships. This is the future task of scholars as well as of those in ministry.

ENTITY AND SUBSTANCE METAPHORS OF THE DIVINE-HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

In the previous sections that considered the masculine and feminine metaphors of the divine, the incomprehensible mystery, God, has been described in terms of metaphors based on human relationships such as the loving and caring father, and the nursing and tending mother. There are other dimensions of human experiences that can provide analogy to the understanding of the divine, namely, our experiences of physical objects and material substances, motions and phenomena that are crucial to our human existence. Since human beings are not matter alone, nor pure spirit, our existence depends on the entities that give us sustenance, and this is revelatory of our relationship with God and with one another. On the other hands, God is pure Spirit whose existence does not depend on material substances. Yet we talk about God and about our relationship with God in terms of entities and substances. First let us take the anonymous author's *The Cloud of the Unknowing* and *The Book of Privy Counseling*, which portray the relationship of a person to God in contemplation with the metaphors of cloud (of forgetting and of unknowing), and of sleep, and of Christ as the door to the divinity.

The author of *The Cloud* is a contemporary of Julian of Norwich in England, Meister Eckhart in Germany, and Catherine of Siena in Italy in the fourteenth century when Europe was deeply religious and sat-

urated with faith that penetrated every aspect of the lives and culture of people. One of the themes that the English author of *The Cloud* stresses is that God can never become the object of the mind and therefore can never be captured by our thoughts adequately but can only be touched by love. In giving practical guidance to contemplatives, he says in metaphor, "I urge you to dismiss every clear and subtle thought no matter how holy or valuable. Cover it over with a thick *cloud of forgetting* because in this life only love can touch God as he is in himself, never knowledge."⁴⁴ By using the metaphors, the cloud of forgetting and sleep, the author asserts that the faculties of imagination and reason are no longer operative in contemplation; they are "securely bound and utterly emptied."⁴⁵ The result is "Happy the spirit, then, for it is free to sleep soundly and rest quietly in loving contemplation of God simply as he is, while the whole inner man is wonderfully nourished and renewed."⁴⁶ The faculties of the soul are asleep in contemplation but love is awake. The mind is dark but filled with love.

Human hearts yearn to know God, and our faculties are made to search for the clear knowledge of God. Paradoxically, however, the author tells his disciples to bury all conceptual thinking and reasoning beneath a cloud of forgetting and to empty their mind of all images, since they are useless for attaining to God. This brings pain because naturally faculties want to know; deprived of their object of thinking, reasoning and imagining, they suffer. Yet in this emptying, and in the cloud of forgetting, the soul is touched by "the blind stirring of love,"⁴⁷ and filled with the inexplicable joy of God. God is found in the dark knowledge, touched in a cloud of unknowing. The author says, "See that nothing remains in your conscious mind save in a naked intent stretching out toward God. This awareness, stripped of ideas and deliberately bound

and anchored in faith, shall leave your thought and affection in emptiness except for a naked thought and blind feeling of your being.”⁴⁸

William Johnston says, in the Introduction to *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counseling*, which he edited, that “all thoughts, all concepts, all images must be buried beneath a cloud of forgetting, while our naked love (naked because divested of thought) must rise upward toward God hidden in the cloud of unknowing. The cloud of unknowing is above, between me and my God, and the cloud of forgetting below, between me and all creatures.”⁴⁹ The author powerfully tells us that God is above our conceptual terms and that only love can find our true being in God and God in our being.

The author of *The Cloud* uses metaphors: “Christ is the door” to refer to his manhood, and “Christ is the porter” to refer to his Godhead. Christ is one person but has two natures, God and man, and in order to reach the Trinity, one must pass through the door of Christ; there is no other way. The author interprets our Lord’s words and says:

As God, I am the all-powerful porter and therefore, it is up to me to determine who may enter and how.... So I clothed myself in an ordinary human nature and made myself utterly available so that no one could excuse himself from coming because he did not know the way. In my humanity, I am the door and whoever comes in by way of me shall be safe.⁵⁰

It is only through Christ that we can go to God. It is through the humanity of Jesus that we encounter divinity. William Johnston remarks:

It is interesting to remember that some of the Fathers (of the Church) refer to the humanity of Christ as “the cloud of unknowing” because it, as it were, conceals the divinity of the Word. With the eyes of

faith and love, the contemplative pierces through the physical qualities of Christ and finds the Word of God—and it is here that he remains in Trinitarian rest.⁵¹

Thus our relationship with Christ is expressed as the cloud of forgetting which is the emptying of false images, and the cloud of unknowing which is the naked faith. Christ is the door through which we enter divinity, and Christ’s humanity is a cloud of unknowing because his divinity is hidden. Christ is the porter (in which the vehicle is an agent and not a substance) because he is all-powerful in allowing or denying a person entry into the divinity of Godhead.

There are other metaphors that are particularly favored by mystics such as the author of *The Cloud*, Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart and Thomas Merton. One of these metaphors concerns “God is the ground of our being,” in which the vehicle is the ground. The author of *The Cloud* asserts, “God is your ground of being and your singleness of heart,”⁵² which reveals the irrevocable ontological dependence of human beings on God. The author takes great pains in stressing the core reality that God is a person’s being but the reverse does not hold. God is my being but my being is not God. The author stresses the fact that a person finds his or her full identity only in God, and in God a person is who he or she really is.

The “God is the ground of our being” metaphor is not used only by the author of *The Cloud*, but it is in fact the favorite theme by which the Rhineland mystic, Meister Eckhart, attempts to capture the relationship of the soul to God. For him too, God is the ground of the soul. Richard Woods comments on this and says that the cardinal elements of Meister Eckhart’s spirituality concern “in particular the priority of the intellect and the presence of God in the ground of the soul. For the birth of the Word of God in the heart of the just person

is the sudden realization or revelation of that presence in consciousness, that is at the apex of the mind, the spark of the soul.”⁵³

Meister Eckhart himself writes:

By looking upon creatures, God gives them their being; by looking upon God, creatures receive their being. The soul has a rational, intelligent being. Because of this wherever God is, there also is the soul; and wherever the soul is, there is God. Now it says: “He was found within.” That is within which dwells in the ground of the soul, in the innermost of the soul.⁵⁴

Thus for Eckhart the birth of God in the soul is the untrammelled realization of God’s presence in the ground of the soul and the spark of the soul. Quoting Augustine, Eckhart writes:

My body and my soul are more in God than they are in themselves.... St. Augustine says, “God is nearer to the soul than it is to itself.... The soul receives its being immediately from God. For this reason God is nearer to the soul than it is to itself, and God is in the ground of the soul with all his divinity.”⁵⁵

With striking similarities to Augustine and Eckhart, Julian of Norwich experiences God as the ground of one’s being and as the center and heart of the human soul and of all creation. Julian writes:

God is nearer to us than our own soul. For he is the ground in whom our soul standeth; and he is the mean that keepeth the substance and sensuality together, so that they shall never part. For our soul sitteth in God in very rest; and our soul standeth in God in sure strength; and our soul is kindly rooted in God in endless love.⁵⁶

For Julian, God is the ground of our being⁵⁷ in whom we sit and stand, in whom we are

deeply rooted and enclosed, because we are nobly created, preciously redeemed, and lovingly protected by God. Julian further describes the relationships with God and states, “Our Lord is the ground from whom our prayer springeth,”⁵⁸ “We have our kindly ground in God,”⁵⁹ and “God is the ground of our beseeching.”⁶⁰ By the “God is the Ground of our being” metaphor, Julian proclaims how deeply and intimately the human soul is grounded and rooted in God’s love. She says, “Our soul is so deep-grounded in God and so endlessly treasured, that we may not come to the knowing thereof until we have, first, knowing of God, who is the Maker; to whom it is oned.”⁶¹

Thomas Merton’s favorite metaphor of God, as the Ground of all that is, is quoted by William Shannon. Merton says:

Underlying all [reality], in the deepest depths that we cannot possibly see, lies an ultimate ground in which all contradictories are united and all come out “right.” For a Christian this ultimate Ground is personal, that is to say, it is a ground of freedom and love (Letter, April 4, 1968).⁶²

Shannon interprets this and states that it is in this “Ground of Love,” in which I am at all times, that I find my identity, my uniqueness, and my interrelatedness. Only if I am aware that I am in God’s presence, can I find myself and my interrelations with our people of God.⁶³ Thus mystics such as the author of *The Cloud*, Eckhart, Julian, and Merton are inspired by the metaphor, “God is the ground of our being,” and this is in tune with the contemporary process theology in which the whole creation is seen as a process of becoming. Since this metaphor highlights God as the Ground of all that exists and God’s saving Presence without which nothing can exist, it helps us to realize how dependent we are on God and how interrelated we are to all creation.

The Old Testament writers use metaphors of God as our Rock, our Shield,

our Fortress, and our Sun. “God is my rock, my fortress, for the sake of your name, guide me, lead me,” thus prays the psalmist (Ps. 31:2–3). The experience of seeing the magnificent rock of granite in Yosemite National Park, California, which is 4,892 feet above the valley floor and which is the largest such rock in the world, gives a significant understanding of what this metaphor meant for the Hebrews when there were no nuclear weapons. The psalmist addresses God: “God our shield, now look on us and be kind to your anointed” (Ps. 84:9). Malachi writes, “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings” (Ml. 4:2). Metaphors are the products of cultural experiences and in our postmodern scientific cultures we are in need of new metaphors such as God as source of energy, light, and fire, metaphors drawn from the discoveries of postmodern science, physics, and ecology.

ORIENTATIONAL METAPHORS OF THE DIVINE-HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Just as our human experiences with entities and substances introduce metaphors, so our experiences of spatial orientations give rise to orientational metaphors that speak of relationships between objects and space, as in up and down, front and back, on and off, center and periphery, and near and far.⁶⁴ There are orientational metaphors that related objects to the time-axis such as the beginning, the end, and the middle; the past, the present, and the future; and the first and the last. Expressed in terms of orientational metaphors of space, God is *in front of us*, *behind us*, *before us*, *above us*, *below us*, *in us*, *outside us*, *with us*, *within us*, at the *center* of our being, and works *in* and *through* us. Since God is transcendent, God is *beyond* space, and since God is immanent, God is *in* space. In reference to

the immanent God, Augustine of Hippo comes to a moving realization:

Late it was that I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new, late I loved You! And, look, you were *with* me and I was *outside*, and there I sought for you and in my ugliness I plunged into the beauties that you have made. You were *with* me, and I was not *with* you.... I pant for you; I tasted, and I am hungry and thirsty; you touched me, and I burned for your peace (Emphasis added).⁶⁵

Here Augustine eloquently articulates the connection between the searching and the finding of God in the innermost depth of the human soul, described in terms of orientational metaphor. Teresa of Avila, the great mystic of sixteenth century Spain, quoting Augustine, says that God is found first and foremost in the soul, and particularly at the center of the soul:

Consider what St. Augustine says, that he sought Him in many places but found Him ultimately *within* himself.... He is *near* enough to hear us. Neither is there any need for wings to go to find Him. All one need do is go into solitude and look at Him *within* oneself (Emphasis added).⁶⁶

Using the orientational metaphors of “God *within*,” and “God at the center,” Teresa asserts the divine indwelling and the ontological centrality of God in our being.

In Teresa’s book, *The Interior Castle*, the soul is symbolized as an interior castle with many dwelling places, made of crystal capable of reflecting the sun’s brilliance. The castle is considered as the dwelling place of God with ambiguities and the perilous character of easily getting lost and self-deceived, furnished with the inextinguishable fountain of light at the center.⁶⁷ The soul enters into itself in prayer, desires to move into the dwelling place of God within, at the center. Before proceeding to any rooms, however, the soul must find the

specific room of self-knowledge and orient itself from there and return there again and again, since self-knowledge is so important, however exalted the soul may be.⁶⁸

For Teresa, self-knowledge is never gained in isolation but always in relation to God, and self-knowledge and humility increase as the soul metaphorically moves towards the center. To the measure the individual increases in self-knowledge in relation to God, the true self is born. Eckhart and Julian consider the birth of the Word of God as taking place in the ground of the soul, whereas Teresa views the soul as finding her true being at the center of her soul where God dwells with all God's splendor. The individual becomes who she is in her union with God, since union differentiates and gives her true selfhood. Most paradoxically, for both Teresa and Julian, it is at the center of our creatureliness, radical poverty, and nothingness that God radiates Godself.

Thomas Merton uses the metaphor *le point vierge*, in reference to the center of our being where God radiates Godself. Merton says:

That expression, *le point vierge*, (I cannot translate it) comes in here. At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, and point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness, and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.⁶⁹

Thus in Merton's terms, God radiates Godself most brilliantly at the point of absolute poverty and radical nothingness at the core of one's being.

Just as orientational metaphors relate objects to space, they also relate objects to time. The transcendent God is *beyond* time, and simultaneously the immanent God is *in*

time. Gregory Baum's explanation of the relationship between the transcendence and immanence of God might shed light here. Baum says:

The infinite is immanent in the finite, not by absorbing or destroying it but by assuring and protecting its finitude and existence. The infinite is in and through the finite, but never identical with it, never absorbed by it, never exhausted by it. The infinite grounds the finite, orients it, and defines its ultimate future. The mode of God's immanence is, therefore, not identity but transcendence.⁷⁰

Again God is the mystery of all mysteries. Since only God is at the beginning, metaphorically God is the beginning. Genesis speaks in orientational metaphors:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, and God's spirit hovered over the water (Gn. 1:1).

The Gospel according to John echoes Genesis and narrates:

In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God *in the beginning*. Through him all things came to be, not one thing has its being but through him (Jn. 1:1).

These statements from Genesis and John's Gospel indicate that the whole creation is in total dependence on God at any moment of time, since creation is a continual process that goes on every moment. In *The Book of Revelation*, the name of the Lord God is the Beginning and the End, as John writes, "I am the Alpha and the Omega" says the Lord God, who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rv. 1:8). The name of God is the First and the Last, as John writes, "God touched me with his right hand and said, 'Do not be afraid; it is I, *the First and the Last*; I am the Living One'" (Rv. 1:17-18).

To Julian of Norwich God says in orientational metaphors:

See, I am God: see, I am *in all things*: see, I do all things: see, I never lift my hands off my works, nor ever shall, *without end*: see, I lead all things *to the end* that I ordain it to, *from without-beginning*, by the same might, wisdom and love that I made it with. How should anything be amiss? (Emphasis added).⁷¹

God is in all things, ordaining them before time began and leading them to the end of time. God is the beginning and the end, and simultaneously God is without beginning and without end.

In praise of God's omniscience, the psalmist sings using orientational metaphors as follows:

Yahweh, you examine me and know me,
you know if I am standing or sitting,
you read my thoughts from *far away*
whether I walk or lie *down*, you are
watching,
you know every detail of my conduct.
The word is not even on my tongue,
Yahweh, *before* you know all about it;
close behind and *close in front* you fence
me *round*,
shielding me with your hand.
Such knowledge is *beyond* my understanding,
a height to which my mind cannot attain
(emphasis added, Ps. 139:1–6).

Most of these expressions are not noticed as being metaphorical because orientational metaphors frequently co-occur with prepositions that quantify or identify certain objects in relation to space and time, and we tend to consider them as mere prepositions.

In some orientational metaphors in which orientation is not overtly shown the concepts of orientation such as UP and DOWN, and UPWARD and DOWNWARD are covertly incorporated into the meaning of a

word. For example, the words *high* and *climb* incorporate the concepts UP and UPWARD, respectively, while the words *low* and *sink* incorporate the concepts DOWN and DOWNWARD, respectively. Furthermore, words and concepts have connotations associated with the cultural values of the speakers who use the language. For example, in general, but not always, the concept HIGH (which is not necessarily realized as the word *high*) connotes positive aspects of power and prestige, whereas the concept LOW (which is not necessarily realized as the word *low*) connotes negative aspects of the loss of power and prestige, as in the *rise and fall* of a nation, *the ascent* to the throne, and *the fall* of Adam and Eve.

Simeon prophesies in saying to Mary, “You see this child: he is destined for *the fall* and for *the rising* of many in Israel” (Lk. 2:34), in which *the rising* is associated with salvation, whereas *the fall* is associated with the rejection of salvation. In the Benedictus, Zechariah says, “The Lord has *raised* for us a power for salvation in the House of his servant David” (Lk. 1:68), associating the power with the upward movement in the word *raise*. Jesus associates the return to the Father with the ascending motion as in “What if you should see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before?” (Jn. 6:62). To Mary of Magdala, Jesus says, “Do not cling to me, because I have not yet *ascended* to the Father” (Jn. 20:17), associating the Father with the concept UP in heaven.

Our prayer is often perceived as an upward psychic motion to God on high as in “To you, Yahweh, I *lift up* my soul, O my God” (Ps. 25:1), and “O Lord, my heart is not *lifted up*, my eyes are not *raised too high*” (Ps. 131:1). The soul laden with sin cries out to God, “Out of *the depths* I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!” (Ps. 130:1), and “Why so *downcast and oppressed*, my soul, put your hope in God” (Ps. 43:5, 43:2), associating the weight of sin with the concept

“down.” The upward movement connotes supplication and exaltation, while the downward movement connotes humiliation as in “Yahweh, who *lifts up* the humble, humbles the wicked *to the ground*” (Ps. 147:6). Similarly in the Magnificat, Mary says, “God has *pulled down* princes from their thrones and *exalted* the lowly” (Lk. 1:52), in which the word *down* connotes humiliation, whereas the word *exalt* is associated with making somebody higher in rank.

These are some orientational metaphors that have affected the mentality of people for almost two thousand years. Such metaphors particularly concern “God in heaven,” as in “God’s throne is in heaven” (Ps. 2:4), and “the Most High enthroned in heaven” as in “I saw the Lord Yahweh seated on a high throne” (Is. 6:1), or something similar in terms of the metaphorical vehicle, “high.” The word *the most High* is associated with God as in “Yahweh thundered from heaven, *the most High* made his voice heard” (Ps. 18:13), and “For thus speaks *the most High*, whose home is eternity, whose name is holy” (Is. 57:15).

Similarly, in reference to the Messiah, the angel Gabriel says to Mary, “He will be great and will be called Son of *the Most High*” (Lk. 1:32), and also in reference to the Holy Spirit the angel also uses the word *the Most High* as in “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of *the Most High* will cover you with its shadow” (Lk. 1:35–36). Zechariah also says in the Benedictus to John (later the Baptist), “And you, little child, you shall be called Prophet of *the Most High*” (Lk. 1:76). At the nativity of Jesus, angels sing, “Glory to God in *the highest heaven*, and peace to men who enjoy God’s favor” (Lk. 2:14). These examples illustrate the predominance of the metaphors of the divine associated with the notion UP, which connotes the transcendence of God. These metaphors convey important religious and cultural meanings in

the context of the Old and New Testaments where the supremacy of monotheism is to be guarded against idolatry.

Metaphors reflect our conceptual system by which we perceive reality, and they in turn powerfully mold a common consciousness or mind-set by which we live our lives. Metaphors that predominate, such as God living on high, although they rightly connote the transcendence of God, can implant in our mind literally frozen images of the Divine, as the outsider God, the God over and above history, the God out there, who has nothing to do with our human experiences. This kind of interpretation may create false images, dualistic dichotomies, distortions of reality and estranged relationships. Metaphors that highlight the transcendence and infinity of the Divine, unless they are counterbalanced by other metaphors that highlight the divine immanence of God’s total and incessant involvement with the finite, can give rise to an unhealthy mind-set that relegates the infinite Being to a realm over and above the finite world, as the One who is extrinsic to and apart from human life history. As Gregory Baum puts it, there is a danger of confining the Divine as object and stranger in heaven from where he rules the earth and its people without being involved with their lives and experiences, but only intervening occasionally with their predicaments.⁷² If this happens, human beings alienate themselves from God, from themselves and from each other.

If we objectify God as stranger, we become strangers to ourselves, to one another, to the cosmos and to the divine. In this theory, God cannot be found in human experiences. We are forced to seek help from outside of ourselves, when in fact help might have been already given if we reflect on our experiences. Since we become alien to ourselves, we feel we are excused from loving our fellow human beings, and from working for the unity of humankind.

If, however, the metaphor “God is in heaven” is counterbalanced by the other metaphor “God is the ground of our being,” for example, the latter brings to our consciousness that God is the intrinsic, insider God who constantly recreates us from within, who grounds our being in God’s being, and who energizes us from within to love and to pay the price of loving. More and more the contemporary world needs new metaphors and new images that speak of the immanent divine who dwells with us and within us, who works in and through us, and who unites all of us with one another and the cosmos with love and caring for one another.

LIVING METAPHORS

The implication and relevance of metaphors of the divine to our lives are three-fold. First, viewed from the postmodern perspectives for a new world based on interrelationships and interconnectedness, it is mandatory to highlight the feminine metaphors of the divine so as to counterbalance the preponderance of the masculine metaphors and thus to account for a more holistic relationship with God. This is necessary since the exclusive use of the masculine metaphors of God in the past has often led to the literalization of metaphors in our consciousness and has produced harmful threats of domination and submission, and a gender-based dichotomy of superiority and inferiority. Because we live by metaphors, we can discern our conceptual system reflected in our language, and can transform our consciousness by being mindful of our language use. By attempting a more holistic metaphorical usage, we can come closer to harmonizing the cosmic rhythm of interrelationships and interconnectedness and thus can more adequately respond to the gentle and loving luring of God.

Second, since Jesus became who he was and realized his Sonship, women are called

to realize their daughtership through relationships of intimacy with God in their own right, not through destructive submission to the false images of God, but through and beyond holistic metaphors of God.

Third, in tune with the postmodern worldview of interrelationships and interconnectedness, metaphors enter into a paradigm shift that expresses new relationships, namely, a shift from metaphors of the extrinsic and transcendent divine to metaphors of the intrinsic and immanent divine, who as ground of our being, and as saving presence, vivifies us and unites us with everything under the sun in love. This shift is necessary because, as discussed earlier, too much focus has been placed in the past on the extrinsic and transcendent divine and this has resulted in the alienation of human beings from the divine, from nature, from their human experiences, from themselves, and from each other. In the postmodern nuclear and ecological age, when we are faced with the prospect of instantaneous extinction and the urgent need for holistic caring, we must create new metaphors of relationships that include all and connect all with intimacy.

In the attempt at relating to the divine presence, we can say, for example, “God is the lurer who creates interrelationships,” “God is the interconnecting energy,” “God is the ever-generating Force,” “God is our gently luring lover,” “God is the great becoming,” “God is self-revealer in persons, nature, and events,” “God is the center of relationality,” “God is our never-failing guide, our fellow-traveler on life’s journey,” “God is the healer of wounds,” “God is the companion of the lonely,” “God is the liberator of the oppressed,” “God is the generous giver of gifts,” “God is the compassionate caretaker of the cosmos,” “God is the living flame of love,” “God is the source of our life,” “God is the transformer of culture and society,” “God is the rescuing power that liberates us

from all forms of oppression,” and “God is our intimate friend who unites all in love.”

Each of these highlights only one aspect of the divine, but taken together in interconnectedness, we have a better picture of the reality of the divine-human relationships. It is only possible to speak of God metaphorically and partially since God is beyond naming and beyond conceptualization. Yet, naming our relationships with the divine in metaphors helps us to become aware of the meanings hitherto hidden to us, and this new awareness transforms our perception of the world, changes our value systems and the desires that determine our human actions. Thus metaphors define the vision of our life in which we operate and direct our future course of action. Sooner or later individuals are summoned to answer personally the Lord’s question, “And you, who do you say that I am?” (Mk. 8:29). To answer, scholars are summoned to investigate the multiple names and metaphors of the divine that reveal God’s vital engagement in our human experiences.

Finally, metaphors are not only created by scholars but come from the lived experiences of people. Therefore, this must be the final criterion of their validity. They do not simply give knowledge; they transform our consciousness and lead us to interrelationships.

NOTES

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