

# *Feminist Spirituality - A Preliminary Sketch*

JOY TETLEY

The first thing to realise about 'feminist spirituality' is that there is no such 'beast': that is to say, we cannot point to a phenomenon, clearly and closely definable, of which we can pronounce with confidence, 'Here it is'. If feminist spirituality is anything, it is elusive and allusive. Like 'feminist theology', it manifests itself in a whole spectrum of approaches and emphases, not all of which blend easily together. Or, to put it more dynamically and positively, it is kaleidoscopic in its many forms and colours and changing patterns. Looking into this sphere can be delightful and startling, revealing and disorientating. It may well challenge and disturb. It may also open up new ways of seeing, fresh insights into the wonder of our relationship with a God whose character is bewilderingly many-splendoured and tantalisingly beyond the limitations of our human defining. And the Spirit of God can disturb, even in revealing.

Because of the constraints of space, this article will confine itself to a brief indication of some of the most striking ways in which 'feminist spirituality' is expressed within the Christian tradition. However, it should also be the Church's urgent concern (not least in a Decade of Evangelism!) that 'spiritualities' are being explored and developed by women who, in all honesty and integrity, cannot live authentically within the Church's boundaries. Some have moved out; others have no inclination to move in. All feel that Christianity in its traditional expression has ignored or degradingly denied the value and positive spiritual significance of women's being and experience.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy (and strangely satisfying) for the Church to wring her hands and condemn. It is much harder, yet surely potentially more fruitful, to ask what can be learnt from this situation. Why is it that a religion which claims to have the most radically liberating message of all time has failed to communicate the powerful reality of that message to so many women — women who are nonetheless searching for meaning and deeply concerned about the future of humanity and creation. What is the Spirit saying to the Church through these women of commitment, with their sharp critique of Christian beliefs and attitudes?

There can be no denying that the Church has much to answer for. Despite the alarming (and culturally shocking) behaviour of Jesus towards women, despite the inspired insight of Paul that new covenant is new creation, in which gender hierarchy is eliminated, a strong strand in Christian teaching

---

<sup>1</sup> For a helpful introduction to the character of feminist spirituality in its broadest terms (including non-Christian), see U. King, *Women and Spirituality*, Macmillan, London 1988.

and practice has persistently regarded women as less than acceptable. They are sisters of primal Eve; so they are 'the devil's gateway', the prime source of temptation and sin, which latter usually has a heavy sexual agenda. Put crudely (but accurately!): if you want to be holy, keep away from women. They are temptresses, weakly prone to sin, and will lead men of God astray. Their sexuality is fraught with mysterious danger. They are 'fearfully' rather than wonderfully made. Rhythms of fertility, secret earthy darkness, outflow of blood, water and milk — forces of powerful creativity, outside male experience — disturbing union of matter and mystery: such 'otherness', such 'terrors' can be more readily controlled by associating them with the realm of 'uncleanness'. So, at least, it can seem to women. And it has to be said that a crushing catalogue of examples could be assembled from Church history and 'holy writings' which present and treat women as essentially polluted, unsafe and unholy. If they are to approach holiness, they must acknowledge the inherent sinfulness of their sex, remain virgin, disguise their physicality, and submit themselves to male direction. Neither can it be reassuringly claimed that such attitudes have entirely disappeared. They might not have quite so blatant an external expression, but they still exercise an insidious influence. In this area, old covenant taboos die hard.<sup>2</sup>

For an increasing number of women, all this is a cause of deepening distress, revulsion and protest. It is compounded by other, not unrelated factors: the heavily masculine character of the Church's hierarchy and therefore of its *modus operandi*; the fact that the Church's 'official' Scripture and doctrine have been formulated, written and interpreted overwhelmingly by men; the long history of the Church's exclusion of women from the exercise of significant authority. The cumulative effect of this heritage can make it very difficult for women to believe in their hearts what the Church clearly teaches — that womankind is as fully loved and redeemed by God as the male of the species. At best, salvation can seem 'second hand' and its enjoyment dependent on adoption of a male-defined approach to life and spirituality; the assumption, in effect, of a quasi-male identity. Given the way much of the tradition is interpreted and expressed, women have a good deal of inner translation work to do if they are to know themselves cherished by God as *women*.

For those determined to remain within the Christian fold, such translation work can be very costly. It requires courage to rewrite conditioned programmes, whilst at the same time frequently facing ridicule and/or hostility from others (both male and female!). Yet this is the pilgrimage to which more and more Christian women feel called and drawn. It is for many a journey into experiential awareness of the God who creates both men and women in the divine image. This God can identify directly with both genders, being the creative and ontological source of all we might want to describe, humanly speaking, as 'masculine' and 'feminine'. In this God, as the Judaeo-Christian tradition has long attested, there is 'kinship' as well as 'otherness'. For women to discover the personal reality of God's kinship *in their own gender terms* can be like a profound conversion experience which releases them to enter far more fully into their Christian inheritance. As Janet

<sup>2</sup> On this whole area, see e.g. A. Joseph, ed., *Through the Devil's Gateway*, SPCK, London 1990.

Morley puts it, 'to let myself adore 'her' was like the opening of a floodgate, an overwhelming and rather terrifying new act of surrender... a releasing of something that I had long prevented myself from knowing'.<sup>3</sup>

As such women have been discovering and realising, despite the weight of negativity, there is in fact a good deal in Scripture and Christian tradition to encourage them in exploring a relationship with God which fruitfully incorporates their female identity and experience. One obvious example is that of God imaged as mother. The Bible is rich in all kinds of imagery employed to describe the indescribable God, who nonetheless abounds in self-revelation. 'Maternal' characteristics seem to be very much part of this revelation. So God is pictured as giving birth to Israel (Deut. 32:18), as crying out, gasping and panting like a woman in labour (Isa. 42:14), as the ideal woman who cannot forget her little child (Isa. 49:15), as a comforting mother (Ps. 131:2; Isa. 66:13), as a midwife (Ps. 22:9; 71:6; Job 10:18f). In the OT Apocrypha, God is pictured as breast-feeding Israel (Baruch 4:8). And God, Jesus and the Spirit of God can all be depicted as mother-birds (in the case of Jesus, a self-depiction) (Gen. 1:2; Exod. 19:4; Deut. 32:11, 12; Luke 13:34). In subsequent Christian spirituality (if not theology), the motherly God remains a profound source of meditation and reflection — for men as well as women — and in relation to all three 'members' of the Holy Trinity.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is as the imagery begins to be explored by women that it might be said to come into its own. The fourteenth century Julian of Norwich is a prime and early example. She develops the perception of God's motherhood (usually as focussed in Jesus) at some length and in some depth and in her own womanly way. She seems to arrive at her understanding through a typical blend of personal experience and pondered theology ('feminist spirituality' at its most powerful!). It involves a telling mixture of pain, tenderness and down-to-earth realism — and all 'enfolded in love'.

For Julian, understanding of the significance of the death of Jesus can be illuminated and deepened by seeing it in terms of the analogy of giving birth. Jesus, 'All-Love, bears us to joy and eternal life!... And he is in labour until the time has fully come for him to suffer the sharpest pangs and most appalling pain possible — and in the end he dies.'<sup>5</sup> The use of the masculine pronoun makes it clear that Julian is in no way denying the maleness of the 'historical Jesus', She is rather seeking prayerfully to explore and communicate something of the essential meaning of the Passion. In so doing, she employs a metaphor that many women will be able directly to 'get inside of'. It is imagery that, according to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus himself used on the eve of his execution (John 16:20-12). In our own day, it is imagery which offers women a particular way into 'owning' the message of the Cross — and which offers men a perspective that, for them too, can be potentially creative. It can bring in a healthy counterbalance, for example, to the kind of language

<sup>3</sup> From J. Morley, *I Desire Her with My Whole Heart*, quoted in A. Loades, *Feminist Theology, A Reader*, SPCK, London 1990, p 159.

<sup>4</sup> For a concise and helpful summary, see R.B. Edwards, *The Case for Women's Ministry*, SPCK, London 1989, pp 133-143. See also V.R. Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, Crossroad, New York 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, chap 60. A useful guide to encountering Julian is provided in R. Llewelyn, ed., *Julian Woman of Our Day*, DLT, London 1985.

that has tended to dominate atonement theology and spirituality, i.e. the achievement of some kind of transaction. Giving birth has rather different resonances to, say, settling a debt!

Sara Maitland provides a striking modern example of the power of the birth metaphor in relation to the Crucifixion. She also, like Julian, displays an integrated blending of personal experience, 'spirituality' and theological reflection. Such integration is an important feature of much feminist spirituality. If taken seriously, it is something from which the Church as a whole could benefit greatly. How much damage has been caused by the construction of increasingly rigid and separate compartments to contain that for which the very expanses of heaven and earth are an inadequate container? How much we need 'synthetic' vision, the weaving together of threads, the honouring of Christ as Integrator (cf e.g. Eph. 1:9, 10). The spirituality of Christian feminists can help us to break through barriers in this respect.

And so, back to birth and death. 'God', says Sara Maitland, 'brought new life, gospel life to birth, stretched out for hours on the cross, autonomy removed by aggressive experts, the eternal Word reduced to wordless cries, bleeding down into the dark, overwhelmed by the sense of desolation, the doubt as to how much more you can put up with. And afterwards the joy, the new life, the sense of mystery and distance. It seems that the creative birthing of God as expressed in Christ's passion (and reiterated in the rituals of baptism) can be given a deeper relating if we can learn to hear as holy the bodily experiences of women and trust the metaphor of God as mother'.<sup>6</sup> There speaks a mother, one who has given birth, a woman. A woman, moreover, who can find in her nature and bodily functions insights into the character and workings of God. For that, as we have noted, she has the clear permission of Scripture.

This is not, of course, to say that God is being thought of literally as a woman — any more than the use of male imagery suggests that God is to be perceived literally as a man. God is not a man. God is not a woman. Yet, as Janet Morley salutarily reminds us, 'it ought to be as shocking to us that many modern Christians unreflectively envisage God as male, as it would be to think of confining God within the female mould'.<sup>7</sup> When speaking of God, we are always and inevitably in the realm of metaphor and analogy suggestive and revelatory, yet ever inadequate because of the inescapable limitations of human understanding and language vis-à-vis God. Nonetheless, whilst clearly recognizing this, the Bible takes no vow of cautious silence. In relation to God (whether hidden or revealed) scriptural metaphors often tumble over one another, regardless of whether they blend or clash. A whole wealth of imagery, both animate and inanimate, animal and anthropomorphic, is brought into service to express what God is perceived as saying about the divine being and activity — or simply as the writer's attempt to respond to an experience of God. Exploring the rich range of metaphor in the Bible's portrait of God ought to open up new horizons, bring fresh insight and challenge — and guard against making God in a human image of either gender.

<sup>6</sup> S. Maitland, *Ways of Relating*, quoted in Loades, *Feminist Theology*, p 154.

<sup>7</sup> J. Morley, *op. cit.*, p 162.

It might also be suggested that neglecting or disallowing metaphor involving female experience (though it is clearly there in Scripture) gives fertile ground for that distortion of orthodox theology which posits actual maleness of the Deity. In Britain, latterly, Janet Morley has done much to highlight this state of affairs by her creative production of prayers and liturgies which draw on a wide variety of imagery, including the feminine. For the searcher after 'feminist spirituality', it will be instructive to ponder on *and use* her work — and to think carefully about her eloquent 'apology' for moving into the territory. As she says, 'it is often the conscious introduction of a feminine image, pronoun or motif that first indicates how extensively the feminine has been omitted from traditional religious language. Its power to shock is a measure of its previous exclusion from the discourse'. She sees this exclusion as something rather more than accidental: 'I think what has happened is that our culture's notion of "the feminine" has collected a great many more associations than simply a reference to the female of the species: and these associations carry negative value, and hence are not felt to be appropriately evoked in speaking of God'. She identifies them as including weakness, sexuality and 'as it were the "dark" side of human nature, with its chaotic and mysterious emotions'. Yet, she argues, 'one of the results of not using feminine imagery of God is precisely an incapacity to recognise and honour how experience and behaviour that is inherently female can mediate God to us'. She goes on to point out: 'Many women have found the experience of pregnancy, breast-feeding and nurturing children to be powerful images of the all-embracing tenderness of God towards us. Many people can recognize in relationship with their own mother or sister a complex combination of fierce loyalty and hardly articulable anger which may well be a rather illuminating metaphor of our relation to God. Many have found in our women friends a source of inexhaustible patience, supportiveness and discernment that mirrors what we often seek in prayer. Many have found in our solidarity with other women (whom we may not always like) the experience of a God who speaks for the oppressed and requires human justice. But unless the words exist which will link our prayer and our experience of women and as women, we may diminish that experience, and deny ourselves fresh discovery in prayer.'<sup>8</sup>

Language matters. It is not only expressive; it is formative. It can establish and reinforce where we are; or it can help us to journey into new areas. For most folk, Janet Morley's prayers would fall into the latter category. A few examples may give a 'flavour'.

God our mother,  
 you hold our life within you;  
 nourish us at your breast,  
 and teach us to walk alone.  
 Help us so to receive your tenderness  
 and respond to your challenge  
 that others may draw life from us,  
 in your name, Amen.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp 159-161.

As a woman looks to her friend  
that she may open her heart and be free,  
that her words may find understanding,  
and her fears be contained;  
so do I look to you O God,  
that you may search me and know my ways,  
bringing me judgement and tenderness  
and sending me home released.

Hidden God,  
whose wisdom compels our love  
and unsettles all our values;  
fill us with desire  
to search for her truth,  
that we may transform the world  
becoming fools for her sake,  
through Jesus Christ, Amen.<sup>9</sup>

It will be seen from the above quotations that, for Janet Morley, the 'feminine dimension' in God is not confined to motherhood. In this she is certainly representative of Christian feminism generally. There is much more to femininity than being a mother. So, as Gail Ramshaw reminds us, 'It is God as she who calls us into the ways of wisdom'.<sup>10</sup> The figure of Wisdom, as a hypostasization of the divine being, is one that richly repays exploration as far as feminist spirituality is concerned. In developed Jewish tradition, Wisdom is decidedly feminine — and not just in grammatical form. She is an emanation of the God of light (Wisd. 8:3-4), an image of God's goodness (Wisd. 7:26). She shares God's throne (Wisd. 9:10) and was working with him at creation (Prov. 8:27-31). She can be described as 'all-powerful, intelligent, unique' (Wisd. 7:22). 'She is but one yet can do everything, herself unchanging. She makes all things new' (Wisd. 7:27). She is sister, wife, mother, beloved and teacher. She is leader and preacher and officiates in the sanctuary. She searches people out, offering life, rest, knowledge and God's friendship to those who accept her (see Wisd. 6-11). Here, as an expression of God, is a very *un*-stereotypical woman, certainly not weak or confined to submissive domesticity. Here are many liberating and affirmative possibilities by means of which women can explore their relationship with God in terms (as it were!) of 'woman to woman'.

If all this seems too 'cosy', it is as well to heed Janet Morley's perceptive comment: 'If, as women, our only access to the strangeness of God is through the 'otherness' of the male image, then that will insist on the wrong kind of otherness.... Feminine imagery not only affirms a comfortable closeness for women to the God in whose image we are made: it also prevents us from distancing ourselves — as we can do with 'male' language — from the uncomfortable, even frightening closeness of the difficult God who is not made in our image'.<sup>11</sup> We cannot avoid facing the divine terror if we can no

<sup>9</sup> From J. Morley, *All Desires Known*, Women in Theology, London 1988, pp 14, 53, 12.

<sup>10</sup> G. Ramshaw, *Searching for Language*, Pastoral Press, Washington 1988, p 193.

<sup>11</sup> J. Morley, *All Desires Known*, p 5.

longer dismiss God as a man. We might also suggest that when women are relating to God as 'feminine', it is less likely that they will believe that they can pull the wool over her eyes. Mothers, sisters and women friends have a way of uncovering the real truth!

That said, many Christian feminists do also find it deeply enriching of their spiritual lives to relate to God as Father, Husband and Lover. These, of course, are relationship analogies that have always had a more or less high profile throughout the history of Christian spirituality. Yet, particularly in the case of God as partner/lover, they can be experienced by women as very fruitfully authentic. 'My beloved is mine and I am his' (Song of Sol. 2:16). The exquisite and sensuous, not to say erotic love-poem that is the Song of Songs has traditionally been interpreted as a depiction of the relationship between Christ and his Church. It would be interesting to ask 'modern Christian man' how he feels about being identified with the female in this passionate love affair. Male mystics of earlier times dealt with this by retreating into the femininity of the soul. For a good many women, at least, not much inner translation work is needed in this area. Again, it speaks directly to who they are and how they relate. It engages them at the deepest level.

Like all other interpretative analogies, however, it cannot be all — for God is God, the source and perfection of personal relationship, yet always beyond us as well as with us. In exploring and experimenting with a whole range of imagery, the feminists are helping to underline this vital truth. They are also helping to remind the Church of the nature of divine power as revealed in Jesus. It is a consistent and persistent theme in Christian feminist spirituality that God's power is not about domination and hierarchical control. God works from the centre, God works from the edge; works to bring about reconciliation, integration, mutual understanding, love and service; works by persuasion, example and costly self-sacrifice; works perseveringly for change from within and, despite the ravages of sin, keeps on working to fulfil the divine purpose of gathering up all things in Christ. One of Janet Morley's collects captures the tone of this (thoroughly biblical) perception:-

Christ our Lord,  
you refused the way of domination  
and died the death of a slave.  
May we also refuse to lord it  
over those who are subject to us  
but share the weight of authority  
so that all may be empowered  
in your name, Amen.<sup>12</sup>

It is in this spirit that feminist spirituality dares to assume a prophetic dimension, praying and speaking out for a radical revision of the way power is exercised within and by the Church; for the priority of persons over ideas and unbending legalism; for a greater respect and responsible reverence for

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 14.

God's precious creation; for the exposure and remedying of injustice and 'humbug'; for a deeper awareness of the greatness of God's being and the wideness of God's mercy; for the interests of courageous love and fullness of life.

Walking in this territory and living out its values and implications can be bewildering and lonely. It can also be full of joy and delight that one wants to share with others who will understand. Thus, as Ursula King puts it, has emerged 'a new celebration of community, of the bonding among women. The sharing of stories of suffering, oppression and joy, of histories unknown and newly discovered, has created a new sense of solidarity among women expressed as "sisterhood" .... Sisterhood is made up of an immense web of threads of all colours and sizes; its activities consist of connecting and sharing, of speaking and sparking'.<sup>13</sup> Yet, helpful as all this is, Christian feminists in no way seek to exclude themselves from enjoying, sharing with and learning from the company of 'brothers'. Their vision is one of the wholeness of humanity in Christ, a community of women and men who are equal and free before God, who find their meaning and self-definition through relationship with the God who creates and cherishes and redeems them as they are. It is indeed the prayer of many Christian women who have experienced the kind of spirituality pointed to in this article that the sharing of their experience may set more and more *men* free to explore the breadth and depth of the possibilities inherent in their relationship with God — and to respond boldly to their often challenging implications.

Feminist spirituality, then, is not so much a matter of 'making women visible' — though, in terms of recognizing and receiving the contribution of women through Bible and tradition and into the present day, that is of great importance. It is much more a matter of allowing God to be more fully God in the life of each individual Christian and in the life of the Church as a whole. It is thus far from peripheral in significance. It is thus impossible to pin down!

We may leave the last word with Julian — a word she believed to be spoken to her by God:-

It is I who am the strength and goodness of Fatherhood; I who am the wisdom of Motherhood; I who am light and grace and blessed love; I who am Trinity; I who am Unity; I who am the sovereign goodness of every single thing; I who enable you to love, I who enable you to long. It is I, the eternal satisfaction of every genuine desire.<sup>14</sup>

**The Revd Canon Joy Tetley** is Director of Post Ordination Training in the Diocese of Rochester and a member of the editorial board of *Anvil*.

---

<sup>13</sup> U. King, *Women and Spirituality*, p 19f.

<sup>14</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, chap 59.